SUPPORTING PEOPLE TO LIVE THEIR BEST LIVES:

AN ACTION RESEARCH INQUIRY

By

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ABSTRACT

Supporting individuals to live their best lives is the purpose of Southern Alberta Community Living Association. This thesis describes the inquiry that was designed to gather information about how the association could assist employees to enact this mission more fully. Employees were found to be dedicated having important ideas about how the organization could assist them. This thesis reviews literature regarding the concept of best life as considered from a quality of life perspective, along with factors related to change in complex and dynamic organizations. Differing ways of viewing best life both by employees and through the literature, suggest that a shared understanding of the mission may benefit the organization, as well as strategies to strengthen and support communications and relationships. Further consideration of the concept of best life, or quality of life may be relevant to other agencies and the broader field of support for persons with developmental disabilities.
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Though the journey is not ended, this thesis project is the representation of an inspiring, enlightening and arduous journey towards greater understanding and usefulness in the world. It marks the culmination of a formal learning project that has truly given me many opportunities for personal and academic growth and for whom I have many to thank. Dr. Eileen Piggot-Irvine has been a most steady and sage advisor, guiding me with a firm but quiet hand. I greatly admire her as an educator and researcher, and am privileged that she assisted me with this project.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter, the inquiry topic, the context for the sponsor organization and the researcher will be outlined, followed by the significance of this inquiry. The change readiness of the sponsoring organization will be considered, and then a perspective about the current organizational system with respect to the topic will be offered. The inquiry main questions and guiding questions are stated before the chapter summary.

Southern Alberta Community Living Association (SACLA) supports persons with developmental disabilities in the city of Lethbridge, Alberta. This non-profit organization was created to assist individuals in transitioning from life in a segregated institution to life in an inclusive community, and to then support them individually to live “... their best lives and pursue their dreams” (SACLA, n.d., Mission Statement). This inquiry focuses on how the organization can assist employees to more fully enact this mission statement.

SACLA is provincially funded through the Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) Program in Alberta to provide services that support individuals to live as independently as possible in their own communities (Government of Alberta, Human Services, 2012, Persons with Developmental Disabilities). In this inquiry, the word individual is used to refer to a person with developmental disabilities. The individuals served by SACLA include children and adults of every age, male and female, some living with their families, many with roommates, and others with host families as well as those living independently in their own homes.

The motivation for this inquiry came from a passionate desire to cultivate respect for every person. Much of my working and volunteer life has been focused on inclusion and education of persons with barriers in various aspects of life. My career progression from teaching
assistant to special needs teacher in public education to Team Leader, then instructing youth, has given me broad experience with persons with developmental and other disabilities.

Though I was in the position of Team Leader for only one year, the impact of the experience was substantial. My role was to perform duties both as direct support worker and staff supervisor. Building positive and supportive relationships with individuals and co-workers gave ample opportunity to critically reflect on my own behaviour. Most days I would question something I had said or done. I wondered what could be done to encourage myself and all other SACLA employees to more fully understand and promote independence of the individuals that they assisted. In working from my area of passion, I hoped to inspire others to recognize common ideals (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

I had noticed in my work with SACLA incidents of employee actions that suggested a lack of understanding of or engagement with the mission statement. The Executive Director had communicated this directly as a concern of significance (personal communication, April 2011). We had each observed workers using disrespectful language, attempting to limit or modify behaviour, and restricting choices, with the individuals that they supported. This disconnection between mission and action also appeared to exist within the administrative and management team, as evidenced at times by decision-making based on convenience and administrative policy rather than on respectful support of independence and choice. This research inquiry was developed from concern about this disconnection between the stated mission of the organization and the actions of some employees.

**Significance of the Inquiry**

The mission statement of SACLA places the organization in the position of champion or
supporter, rather than caretaker or therapist for persons with developmental disabilities. For the community of Lethbridge, SACLA has been an exemplar of delivering service that values persons with developmental disabilities as equal members of society able to pursue their goals.

The identification of employee actions that appeared to run contrary to the mission of the organization raised the concern that individuals were not being supported appropriately in some instances. When these types of inappropriate behaviours are seen or known about in the larger community, the credibility of the organization may be undermined.

By capitalizing on the information and recommendations of this inquiry, a potential benefit may be the reaffirmation of the mission of the organization, and a renewal of engagement with it. If the organization seizes the opportunity to develop a shared understanding, a more committed, enthusiastic and caring group of employees may emerge (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Enhanced commitment and enthusiasm may benefit the individuals being supported, the organization itself, and may be projected into the community.

This inquiry provided an opportunity for employees at all levels of the organization to examine their own perspectives on what a best life meant to them, how they supported others to live a best life, as well as what they needed in order to support others to live a best life. It was hoped that those who participated may continue their work with a more mindful approach to their actions in the support of others, and for their own lives. Opportunities for reflection, supported by the organization, may have long-term benefits, as reflection is a fundamental part of integrating learning and work (Senge, 2006), and the place “where intelligent action begins” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 215).

Other potential benefits may arise with the participation of employee groups in working
together to contribute to change. Building community and relationships start with the interactions of small groups of people (Block, 2009). By not capitalizing on the potential energy, ideas and enthusiasm generated through this inquiry, the organization risks loss of credibility in the eyes of its workers. Though there may be a perception of risk associated with inviting more participation in organizational change processes, Weisbord (2004) confirms that it is the way to make meaningful change.

Organizational Context

SACLA, founded in 1980, is one of 29 different service providers (Government of Alberta, Human Services, Approved Community Service Providers) for approximately 1,100 persons with developmental disabilities in the south region (KPMG, 2010, p. 4). It is a stand-alone organization governed by a volunteer board of directors that delegates the management and operations to the Executive Director. With approximately 260 staff and private contractors, most of whom are Canadian Union of Provincial Employees members, it was 24th on the list of major employers in the City of Lethbridge in 2011 (Economic Development Lethbridge, 2012, Major Employers). It is the largest PDD service provider in the South region (SACLA, n.d.).

Job categories of those employed by SACLA include direct support workers, team leaders, coordinators, administrative team, directors and private contractors. A private contractor is a person, couple or family who supports an individual with developmental disabilities in their home as a roommate, rather than as a client of the organization. Hereafter, staff and private contractors will be referred to collectively as employees. Employees of SACLA are predominantly female, and range in age from 18 years old to approximately 75 years old.

Direct support workers with SACLA are called Community Support Workers (CSWs).
Team Leaders (TLs) also work directly with individuals, but have the additional responsibility of staff supervision and support. Though this field of work in Alberta is frequently referred to as rehabilitation services or disability services, SACLA emphasizes the importance of inclusion in community rather than disability or need to rehabilitate. Thus the position title, CSW, describes the support workers are to give in order to assist individuals to live in the community as independently as possible (SACLA, n.d.).

Despite the mission and terminology, it appeared that some employees lack a solid understanding of how these translate into everyday actions. A lack of provincial standards for education or training to work in this field may be a significant contributor to this problem. A 2008 province-wide consultation with PDD stakeholders identified a common desire for more qualified and professional staff (Government of Alberta, Human Services, 2012, “Detailed summary”). In recognition of this need for better training, SACLA initiated a series of specific orientations for all employees regarding history of the field, teamwork, and vision and values. As well, there is value placed on education and training as evidenced by a differentiated pay grid (Executive Director, personal communication, October 2012).

Following the 2008 consultations with individuals, their families, and service providers, an administrative review was also completed in September of 2010, finally resulting in Nine Change Initiatives (Government of Alberta, Human Services, 2012, PDD Change Initiatives) which are summarized in Appendix A. This inquiry may fit within Initiative #5, by demonstrating innovation in supporting the program’s mandate.

**Readiness for change**

Readiness is one of the factors that contributes to the effectiveness of change efforts, and
can be considered from the perspective of either resistance to or support for the change efforts (Armenakis, Harris & Mossholder, 1993, p. 569). Factors external and internal to SACLA relate to change readiness at the individual and collective levels. A primary external factor, the Change Initiatives (Government of Alberta, Human Services, 2012, PDD Change Initiatives) as referred to previously, signals an inevitable change process that may occur without significant further input on the part of SACLA representatives. Though SACLA was part of the stakeholder group that contributed to the data-gathering in 2008, the process was that of consultative decision-making wherein advice is given but decision-makers hold the power (Bunker & Alban, 2002).

The knowledge that significant changes may be on the horizon may possibly put the leadership in a state of expectation and readiness for external change both as individuals and as a team, though there may be a degree of resistance. This may also correlate to readiness for self-directed pro-active change, particularly for any recommendations from this inquiry that may demonstrate a fit with external change initiatives.

A significant internal factor that may facilitate readiness for change is the imminent review of the mission, vision and values of the organization, as the topic of the inquiry is directly linked to the focus of the organization, which is the mission. The timing of this regular organization-wide consultation process may provide support for changes that may be initiated through the process of this inquiry, as active participation in discussion and learning is recognized as an important part of change readiness (Armenakis et al, 1993).

**Systems Analysis of the Inquiry**

According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, a system is, “a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole” (‘System’, 2012). Organizational systems are sets of interdependent parts, each of which may have impact and
consequence on other parts and the whole. In the context of an organizational project, inquiring into the relevant systems will allow for “seeing patterns of interdependency and seeing into the future” (Senge, 2006, p. 343).

SACLA is an organizational system that operates in the context of other powerful systems, notably the provincial government system as the funder (Figure 1), and our society (Figure 2). Figure 1 shows a simplified model of layers of support for individuals with developmental disabilities in Alberta. From the perspective of this research project, factors that influence the operation and governance of SACLA come from the individuals and their families at the top of the pyramid, as well as the legislation, policies and funding from below.

Figure 1. SACLA within the Support and Funding Hierarchy

While the funding system dictates many of SACLA’s operational requirements and therefore may affect some aspects of employee actions, powerful influences arise from the
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communities and societies in which this system exists. SACLA could be considered a complex system, fitting the characteristics as described by Snowden and Boone (2007). As a system within other systems, its form and function has arisen from historical circumstances and evolves with factors from the surrounding environments. SACLA has a large number of stakeholder groups, the interactions of which are not always linear or predictable. As well, societal and individual mental models and experiences of employees and stakeholder groups add to the complexity of the system and its operation.

Mental models guide the manner of support given by employees and organizations (Schalock, Verdugo, Bonham, Fantova & Van Loon, 2008) and are based on trends in the way that persons with developmental disabilities have been perceived, labeled and dealt with in society. They include various versions of these evolving perspectives: the medical model, where individuals with disabilities are thought to need treatment or help; the personal defectology model wherein persons are viewed as having defects rather than traits; or the charity model which views individuals as persons that must be cared for and incapable of holding responsibility (Rioux, 1996).

Personal experience also guides the manner in which employees approach the support of individuals. Education, cultural background, community atmosphere, understanding of rights and freedoms, and life experiences become part of personal perspectives and inform how others are perceived, but more importantly, how we as humans, take action (Senge, 2006).

The rights of persons with disabilities vary greatly around the world. In Alberta, support and services for persons with disabilities are based on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) which in Section 7 guarantees the right to life, liberty and security
(Government of Canada, Department of Justice, 2012, Canadian Charter). Despite this guarantee, a lack of understanding about what concepts such as liberty might mean in real life terms, along with a lack of self-awareness may cause employees to unknowingly act in ways that are counter to the mission of SACLA. Figure 2 summarizes factors that influence employees as community members and as workers.

**Figure 2. Factors Affecting Community and Employee Attitudes towards Persons with Disabilities**

The organization’s vision that all people have the right to live the life they choose (SACLA, n.d.), has promoted an enhanced quality of life for many in our community. SACLA has grown to be the largest support agency for persons with developmental disabilities in Southern Alberta, and gauging from organizational involvement with various initiatives across the province, is a leader in the field. However, factors including increasing administrative demands, frequent focus on crisis management, high staff turnover, organizational growth and lack of common understanding about the organization’s purpose, may have all contributed to
inconsistent enactment of the mission statement.

It may be helpful to think of the limits to growth archetype, described by Senge (2006) as being the pattern from which to view the central issue of this inquiry. Growth, for SACLA, means the continuous increase in the quality of support for persons with developmental disabilities. As discussed earlier, it would appear that in some cases the quality of support is not as high as it should be therefore this growth is currently limited.

Though Senge (2006) maintains that “To change the behaviour of the system, you must identify and change the limiting factor [author’s italics]” (p. 100), in a complex and dynamic system such as SACLA there may be numerous and ever evolving factors limiting growth. Many of these factors may be beyond the control of the organization to address. Therefore, it was practical to think of the issue itself as the leverage point in this inquiry. By engaging employees directly in the consideration of the concept of best life, and by asking them to identify what they need to support others to have a best life, the inquiry addressed the issue specifically.

**Research Topic and Sub-questions**

The key research question was: How can SACLA help all employees to enact the mission to support persons with developmental disabilities to “live their best lives and pursue their dreams” (SACLA, n.d., Mission Statement). Sub-questions to guide and focus this research included:

1. How do employees understand the words ‘best life’?
2. How do employees currently enact the mission statement?
3. What factors act as barriers or enablers in employees’ ability to enact the mission statement?
4. What changes can SACLA make to help all employees support persons with developmental disabilities to live their best lives?

**Chapter Summary**

In this introductory section, I have provided a context for the inquiry organization or system, SACLA, and my perspective within it. Individual employee and organization readiness for change was discussed, based on internal and external factors. Elements contributing to the complexity of the system were outlined, as well as their significance. A rationale was offered for identifying the limits to growth archetype as the overlying pattern of SACLA’s current organizational system. The chapter closed with a statement of the main inquiry question and the supporting sub-questions.

The following chapter provides an overview of academic literature pertaining to the inquiry, including discussions of: best life based on quality of life concepts, change in a complex organization and employee participation in organizational change. Chapter 3 provides an overview of methods and procedures for the inquiry, and includes rationale for the decisions made. Ethical considerations are discussed followed by a description of the data analysis process. Chapter 4 presents five main findings drawn from the data gathered, supported by participant evidence. The three resulting over-arching conclusions are described in terms of relevant academic literature. Recommendations and implications arising from the conclusions are provided for SACLA in Chapter 5, after which limitations to the research inquiry are discussed. Finally, reflections on the inquiry from the researcher perspective are presented in Chapter 6. Included is an examination of the process of action research, the role of the researcher within the inquiry and some personal learning highlights. The chapter concludes with a consideration of
the project’s potential benefits for the researcher, for those within the sponsor organization and the broader community of support agencies.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The mission of SACLA is to support persons with developmental disabilities to “live their best lives and pursue their dreams” (SACLA, n.d., Mission Statement). Improving support for employees to enact this mission was the purpose of this inquiry. Viewing this inquiry from the perspective of SACLA as a complex system provides a background from which to consider potential change initiatives. Literature relating to aspects of this inquiry will be reviewed in this chapter.

Firstly, the idea of what best life means is reviewed through literature associated with the concept of quality of life, followed by the connection between shared understandings and the ability to carry out organizational mission. Next, literature regarding making change in a complex system is considered in a general sense, then the focus is narrowed to consider communication and team relationships. Finally, employee participation in the process of change and improvement is reviewed, with particular focus on the roles of self-reflection, and reflecting and learning with others.

Best Life from a Quality of Life Standpoint

Definitions and underlying assumptions regarding quality in life are examined. Literature on the perspectives of individuals and those who support them is considered, ending with a review of the links between organizational change and shared understandings.

Definitions, approaches and underlying assumptions

Concepts such as best life and quality of life could be described as elusive, as the words themselves can mean different things to different people and groups of people depending on their roles and perspectives. The word best is commonly used to denote something really good and
sometimes refers to something good in comparison to other things as described in Merriam-Webster’s On-line Dictionary (2012). The adjective best, as in best life, can be defined as the superlative of good; “excelling all others; most productive of good; offering the greatest advantage, utility or satisfaction” (“Best”). Taken from these common meanings, a best life for an individual person could mean a really good life, or a good life compared to previous times or circumstances, or a life offering the greatest possible satisfaction. For others, best life may be viewed from the perspective of their moral or cultural background. In order to explore the idea of best life and how it could be supported, it is helpful to draw upon the established and growing body of research and literature that deals with the idea of what is considered to be good for a person’s life, or quality of life.

The word quality in relation to life could be defined as “a degree of excellence” (Merriam-Webster, Inc., “Quality,” 2012). A concise definition for the concept of quality of life was developed by the Centre for Health Promotion at the University of Toronto as referred to by Renwick and Brown (1996); “the degree to which the person enjoys the important possibilities of his or her life” (p. 80). Quality of life has become an umbrella term, used across many disciplines to explore, measure, and explain aspects of quality in life for individuals, communities, societies and on a global level (Glatzer, 2004).

The term quality of life is informed by the value of life factors such as relationships, well-being, social inclusion, self-determination and rights and equality, based on common values from around the world, across cultures and socio-economic classes (Bowling, 2005; Brown, Renwick & Nagler, 1996; Glatzer, 2004). The World Health Organization (1997), or WHO defined quality of life as:
An individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad-ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person's physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, personal beliefs and their relationship to salient features of their environment (p. 1).

Raphael (1996) explained that quality of life models for persons with developmental disabilities have been based on the belief that, “quality of life issues are similar for persons with or without disabilities” (p. 156). Similarly, the quality of life principles of Schalock, Verdugo et al (2008), are “composed of the same domains for all people” (p. 277).

According to quality of life indexes that use the objective approach, quality in various domains such as physical well-being, emotional well-being, interpersonal relations, etc., can be quantified using specific socially identifiable factors. There has been a strong emphasis on the domains of self-determination and social inclusion, particularly with regard to the movement away from institutionalized living in the last few decades for persons with developmental disabilities (Brown et al, 1996; Schalock & Kiernan, 1990). The trend of normalization, or the promotion of living in normal ways in normal communities, was based on the assumption that having access to the amenities of the general population, quality of life based on identifiable factors would be increased and a person’s life would improve (Brown et al, 1996).

Bowling (2005) agreed that while there is evidence to show that common values inform the principles behind quality of life models and tools, each person’s quality of life perspective is informed by a unique set of circumstances, and quality of life can be viewed this way. This subjective model is based on the importance of a person assessing their own life based on their own value system in the context of life circumstances, as in the WHO (1997) definition above.
Perspectives

Perceptions and mental models of both individuals receiving support and those giving support influence perspectives of a best life on an individual level. Schalock, Verdugo et al (2008) identified mental models as being major inhibitors of positive supports for quality of life. Mental models of support that over-emphasize “control, power, health, [and] safety” (p. 277) can be evidenced by use of language. French and Swain (2008) identified the power imbalance between people with disabilities and the professionals as being the main factor behind the differences in meaning and usage of terms such as quality of life and independence.

The idea of best life may be considered in terms of what a person envisions a better future life to be in comparison to their perceptions of past or current life. This personal activity is problematic as circumstances of individual humans and their perceptions of those circumstances are always changing (Bowling, 2005). Brown (1996) described a study wherein perceptions of quality of life specifically changed over time. In his study, participants with developmental disabilities exerted a greater than previously experienced degree of choice when receiving support for specific life skill and community engagement areas over a three year period. There had been significant increases in those areas according to the pre and post measurements, and yet the participants reported a decline in their satisfaction with these aspects of their life (p. 256 – 258). Thus, even with identifiable increases in knowledge or skill that are considered to denote independence and inclusion, meaning an increased quality of life from an objective approach, the quality of life from the individual’s perspective may not increase.

Though Schalock and Kiernan (1990) cautioned that “one should not tacitly assume that one type of environment is inherently higher quality of life than another” (p. 54), these types of
assumptions may still be at work in how best lives for persons with developmental disabilities are viewed by those around them. French and Swain (2008) described a 2004 research project in which persons with disabilities advised professionals about improving their work. An important theme was, “Don’t presume that disabled people desire normality” (p. 138).

How happiness fits with a concept of best or quality life was a topic gaining currency in the literature, as evidenced by the World Database of Happiness, based at Erasmus University in the Netherlands (Veenhoven, 2004). There were many ideas of how to measure happiness, ranging from an individual’s judgment about the overall quality of his or her life, to the frequency of moments of gaiety, to absence of negative feelings, and the ability to know one’s strengths and be able to use them (Bowling, 2005). Veenhoven suggested that supporting efforts for happiness may be more useful for some individuals when “chances for autonomy and improvement are small” particularly since quality of life approaches lacked clarity of meaning (p. 88). Ideas of happiness range widely from person to person as well as from theory to theory, and this too may have a bearing on how a best life is seen from the perspective of the individual and those in support roles.

**Shared understandings**

What makes a good life for a person with developmental disability has been a subject of concern and study for decades (Schalock & Kiernan, 1990) and continues to be a subject of debate in terms of how to assess, measure and quantify (Raphael, 1996; Schalock, Verdugo et al, 2008). Considering quality of life in terms of families rather than solely on individuals is a current trend under focused research as children and adults with developmental disabilities have
increasingly resided with their families or others in close relationships (Samuel, Rillota & Brown, 2012).

Trends aside, organizations that support persons with developmental disabilities in Alberta are mandated under the PDD program mission to support adults with developmental disabilities to be included in the life of their communities and to the degree of independence that is possible. SACLA’s mission may encompass these aspects of quality in life however a shared understanding is needed in order for employees to fully enact it.

The appreciation of mental models or perspectives, and how they may affect one’s actions and the actions of an organization is a fundamental part of the ability to enact the mission of the organization. Schalock, Verdugo et al (2008), stated that we need to bring “mental models to the surface, challenge them, and in the process bring about changes within a culture that promote inquiry and personal awareness” (p. 277).

An initial step in enacting the mission statement across the organization may be to initiate strategies that bring the mental models of those within an organization forward for examination, as they are what constitute the shared meanings (Shipton & DeFillippi, 2011). The understanding of and alignment with the mission and purpose, will evolve “in response to the mental models of the individuals comprising the organization” (p. 75).

In summary, the alignment of mission and actions may begin with an organization-wide review of the perspectives and mental models from which employees operate. From there, change initiatives that work towards alignment with the mission may evolve once shared understandings have been reached. The following topic area considers intentional organization change and improvement in complex organizations.
Change in Complex Organizations

This section outlines ways of thinking about change, development or improvement in complex organizations. First, the words change and development and improvement will be discussed in the broad context of organizational learning. Then, a definition of a complex system will be given, after which literature will be reviewed concerning how positive change may be considered in the context of complex organizations, with a particular emphasis on communication and team relationships.

Defining improvement and learning in organizations

The phrase organizational improvement belongs in the large and varied field of organizational change and development. Van de Ven and Poole (1995), in the introduction to their examination of 16 different theories of organizational change and development, described their use of the words change and development. Simply put, they referred to change as an event that is an “empirical observation of difference in form, quality or state over time,” whereas development is the process of change over time (p. 861). They pointed out that change and development do not necessarily imply something positive; they can also refer to events of a regressive nature. For the purposes of this review, the word improvement in an organizational sense is intended to denote an intentional attempt to enhance an organization’s ability to fulfill its purpose (Choi & Ruona, 2011).

Organizational learning is a term which was seen as the basis for positive change, development and improvement in organizations, as learning is the “competence” (Argyris, 1999, p. xiii) by which organizations can correct errors and innovate. For Senge (2006), learning and change were inextricably intertwined, for learning is essential to an organization’s “capacity to
create” (p. 14). Corley, Gioia and Nag (2011) saw organizational learning and identity as correlated aspects of an organization “that is adaptive in its capacity for change” (p. 359).

**Defining complexity in organizations and systems**

For the purpose of this inquiry, it may be useful to consider SACLA as a complex system, or one described by Best and Holmes (2010) as having the key features of being “dynamic and constantly changing”, existing “within other interdependent systems” and one in which “changes in one part of the system can have unexpected changes in other parts of the system” (p. 148). Snowden and Boone (2007) expanded the definition, in that the complex system has many interrelated parts that are non-linear in their actions, resulting in consequences that may seem inconsistent with the initial action. As well, complex systems evolve based on the past and answers arise from within rather outside of the system. Finally, because the system is in a constant state of evolution, events that may have seemed linear and to be connected through cause and effect, may not be reproducible (p. 71).

**The complexity of organizations and implications for change**

A powerful theory regarding how people may act in predictable ways based on their positions within a system was developed by Oshry (2007). Oshry saw that while organizations are complex in nature, they are but systems, and systems of all kinds have inherent qualities that inform the relationships between people. Thus, following this theory, when there are breakdowns in organization, it may be due to the systemic relationship between the players rather than the players themselves.

Wheatley (2005) agreed that there are relationships and dynamics within our current human systems that may often be foreseen. These systems are based upon a faulty view of
humans being as part of, what is essentially a mechanistic universe. Such a universe and view of humanity translates to an expectation of “conformity and compliance” (p. 21). Problems arise, according to Wheatley, when humans express their uniqueness and creativity.

Complexity was considered by Wheatley (2005) to be a fundamental aspect of organizational systems. She argued that organizations are living systems, and all living systems have the capability to self-organize and move toward complexity as needed (p. 33). Wheatley asserted that it is not the complexity aspect of systems that are troublesome, but that we as humans continue to approach organizations from a mechanistic perspective resulting in a denial of the natural self-organizing abilities to cope with change.

Snowden and Boone (2007) described the contexts of circumstances within systems as the primary stance from which decision-making must occur. These five different contexts are: simple, complicated, complex, chaotic and disorder. Unlike Wheatley (2005), Snowden and Boone saw systems as having the potential at various times and in various circumstances to be operating in one or more of the five contexts. Like Wheatley, they proposed that many leaders and managers assume that their organization or system is predictable and orderly. Accordingly, managers may fail to understand that simple approaches based on linear or mechanistic models may not work in complex organization such as SACLA.

In his article about complexity in organizations, Fabac (2010) wrote about the ability to self-organize as “a process typical of the complex adaptive systems in which components of the system communicate with each other in a way that can be described as spontaneous” (p. 38). He cautioned that while adaptations that result from self-organizing are generally positive, people in new environments may not have satisfactory interactions, resulting in the development of
negative patterns. Fabac agreed with Wheatley (2005) that complexity is typically seen as a barrier to organization change and adaptation. Thus, to make effective change, organizations have to design structures, processes and strategies to allow for the possibility of spontaneous, self-organizing behaviours.

Contrary to Wheatley’s (2005) perspectives on organizations as complex, living systems, Burnes (2005) found the notion of complexity in organizations weakly supported by current theories. He discussed critiques by several scholars and noted that using natural science theories of complexity to describe what occurs in organizations is little more than metaphor. He suggested that while metaphor may be useful, it is a long way from any useful mathematical framework having potential to assist with resolving problems in organizations. While Snowden and Boone (2007) advocated the value of the ideas of complexity from the natural and cognitive sciences, they too saw complexity more as “a way of thinking about the world than a new way of working with mathematical models” (p. 71).

Bolman and Deal (2008) described the key characteristics of organizations as being complex, surprising, deceptive and ambiguous, largely based on the fact that organizations “are populated by people, whose behavior is notoriously hard to predict” (p. 31). While they did not claim to have any guaranteed strategies for successful organizational change, they provided a framework from which to “understand and influence what’s really going on” (p. 42). Of particular importance for a human service-based organization such as SACLA, Bolman and Deal wrote that change initiatives, no matter how well-planned or executed, have the potential to fail if not facilitated by a culture of healthy relationships within the organization.
**Complexity, change, communication and relationships**

Leadership structure and style was seen as a crucial factor in managing complex organizations by Bourne and Walker (2005). Through the examination of a project management study, they concluded that the difficult and “murky” (p. 157) nature of decision-making in complex organizations requires a shift away from traditional command-and-control management to relationship-based models. The requirement of engaging stakeholders both within the organization and beyond, at once complicates communication and relationships, and requires effective communication and relationships to uphold the vision of the organization.

Short (1998) demonstrated an aspect of complexity in organizations by describing how people can switch between systems when they switch roles. For example, two colleagues who are friends may talk about personal topics then switch to a work-oriented conversation. These switches can happen quickly and without a clear understanding that a switch has occurred; boundaries may be transgressed, resulting in confusion and miscommunications. Recognizing and understanding such dynamics is important, but action must be taken, in the form of effective communication; “If communication is a problem, communicate” (p. 64). Though the formal organizational structures within SACLA are important, in order to be effective they have to be supported by the informal or “repetitive patterns of here-and-now interactions” (p. 65). Similarly, Senge (2006) asserted that in order to learn, or change, an organization must engage in dialogue in order to improve dialogue.

In his article about facilitating change within a company, Stroh (2000) identified that in considering their organization from the perspective of the whole system, employees were able to identify the interconnectedness of their roles. The author discovered that this new awareness and
engagement contributed to building relationships, “generated motivation [author’s italics] for people to change and stimulated collaboration [author’s italics] instead of blame” (p. 52), thus the immediate benefits also strengthened the chances for long-term success of the changes. According to Stroh, a broader understanding of SACL A as a system within systems may be a strategy for improved communication and team relationships, and may facilitate organizational change.

In summary, promoting and facilitating change in complex organizations can be seen from a variety of perspectives. Oshry’s (2007) theory provided a perspective that allows for change at the individual and organization level to be made via an understanding of dynamics in systems. Senge (2006) and Stroh (2000) saw great value in using systems thinking as a tool for change, while Snowden and Boone (2007) asserted that decisions on actions should be guided by the context of the situation. For Bolman and Deal (2008), understanding the framework of the organization was necessary for stimulating change. Short (1998), stated that individuals must seek to understand the relationships within the organization, and from that standpoint personally make the changes that they wish to see. Relationships and communication were also fundamental to Wheatley (2005), in that genuine and collaborative relationships represent both an essential vehicle for change, and also an essential result of organizational change. The final topic for review is that of employee participation in change and improvement.

**Employee Participation in Change Initiatives**

The importance of employee participation in change initiatives, and alignment with the mission and values of an organization has been promoted extensively in the literature (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Senge, 2006; Weisbord, 2004). Kerklaan’s (2011) statement that “people are not
against change, but against being changed,” (p. 94) suggested that the impetus to improve may begin with employees’ engagement and participation in change initiatives, both on the personal and collective levels. In this section, the role of reflection at the personal and collective levels is considered in the context of organizational improvement.

**Self-reflection**

A brief review of the literature regarding the theoretical framework for self-reflection in learning and change is followed by a review of practices of reflection as they relate to the workplace. Some of the commonly used terms as they have evolved are discussed, however for the purposes of this inquiry, the term reflection is used in a simple sense, meaning, “consideration of some subject matter, idea, or purpose” (Merriam-Webster, Inc., “Reflection,” 2012). Self-reflection in the workplace would be the act of thinking about one’s self or role in terms of the workplace environment.

**Self-reflection in learning**

The role of self-reflection in the learning process has been solidly entrenched in learning theory for decades. Kolb’s 1984 four part learning cycle was based on the previous work of many scholars such as Dewey, Piaget and Lewin (Kolb, 1984). What Kolb called reflective observation involves the learner reflecting on and observing experience from various perspectives (p. 30). Kolb described knowledge as resulting from the “combination of grasping experience and transforming it” (p. 41).

Mezirow (1990) defines learning as “the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action” (p.1). For adults, Mezirow believed that the critically reflective aspect
to learning also involved reflecting back to prior understandings to decide whether it is relevant for the current situation, a step that he felt was not properly considered by learning theorists of the time. Reflective action was defined by Mezirow as “action predicated on a critical assessment of assumptions” (p. 6), as an integral part of decision making. In his view, as part of a rapid decision-making process, reflection took place as part of the action, rather than as a separate step as in Kolb’s (1984) cycle.

The term transformational learning encompasses the processes involved when humans seek to understand and become aware of their own assumptions, how the assumptions affect actions and then make decisions based on that self-awareness, or self-reflective process (Mezirow, 1990). Illeris (2004) built upon Mezirow’s transformational learning concept, by identifying it as one complex type of learning in a comprehensive framework of learning. Rather than seeing learning as a cycle as Kolb (1984) theorized, for Illeris learning was an interaction between three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and social. Though he agreed that new experiences are integrated with those prior, he did not use the term reflection as in an intellectual process; instead he suggested that integration is a biological function of our brain, “to cope with, structure, retain, and create meaning out of impressions as perceived by our senses” (p. 81). From whatever perspective one chooses to understand the process of reflection, it appears integral to learning and thus important to consider with regard to organizational change.

**Reflection in the workplace**

The strategy of action learning arose from Mezirow’s work, by conspicuously connecting experience with reflection (Marsick, 1990). Action learning is a strategy whereby workers reflect individually and in groups about the results and processes of their efforts, frequently in relation
to a specific project (Marsick, 1990). Self-reflection is the initial step before coming together in project groups to analyze aspects of a problem, review roles, and appreciate others’ perspectives.

In their article about the role of reflection in service learning, or community service placements, Felten, Gilchrist and Darby (2006), argued for the need to integrate the role of emotion in learning. They acknowledged that the theories of Dewey and Kolb include emotion as part of the integrated reflection process, but stated that emotion has a far more important role. Exploring one’s emotional responses to an experience contributes to the depth of the learning, particularly when preparing for working with people in service capacities. The strategy of self-reflection through journaling, especially in response to critical or disturbing incidents, was noted by the authors as an effective technique in integrating emotion into the learning process (p. 42).

Journaling as a tool for reflection for workers supporting elderly individuals was the subject of the research described by Amble (2012). Her study involved engaging workers to complete situation logs after occurrences of unusually high pressure situations. The purpose was to “increase consciousness, make experiences more substantial and find or engender an awareness of the tipping point or edge in a situation” (p. 268). Though participants sometimes found the reflective log difficult to complete due to time constraints, 96% felt it was worthwhile and helped them improve their performance especially during stressful situations (p. 271).

The importance of reflective practices in light of social change for those working in the human services was the subject of an article by Frost (2010). In particular, the pressures of the “risk society” (p. 21 – 22) impact all who support persons with developmental disabilities, as they are expected to foresee and manage risk while promoting the independent actions of individuals, knowing that their decisions could be called into question. Being employed in
human services means working for an organization that is necessarily focused on accountability, itself struggling with bureaucracy from within and from without. Frost argued that reflective practice for those in human services must take into account broader social trends. By considering the self in relation to the organizational and social context and larger systems impacting the work environments, reflective practice can be an effective tool for learning and improvement.

Reflecting with others in the workplace

The act of reflection through discourse is a common tool of adult educators based on various learning theories frequently described by such terms as interactive learning, cooperative learning, group discussion, peer dialogue, and learning groups (Holton & Swanson, 2011). The use of reflection within organizations such as SACL A is supported by Senge (2006) in that when people reflect on their experiences, exchange information and ideas with others and have meaningful discussion and dialogue, significant learning and change may result.

Amble (2012) demonstrated the value of reflection groups in her study. After dedicated periods of written self-reflection through journal writing, participants joined colleagues in regular group meetings to consider their experiences. This practice, particularly in terms of human service workers can foster changes in work behaviour, as well as a sense of “collective wellbeing” (p. 267).

Boud (2010) expanded upon ideas of reflection as a vehicle for learning and change in the workplace through his concept of productive reflection with groups. The practice of individual reflection is not enough for those whose job it is to work with and for others. Boud identified the opportunity and the challenge of reflection with groups in the workplace, in that it,
“involves high levels of commitment to the task, a willingness to be open to the ideas of others, and… a reasonable level of trust” (pp. 35 – 36).

The trend of group reflection or collective focus was also discussed by Fook (2010) in terms of the need to see reflection as a process, neither more individual or collective, but rather understood as “the individual in social context [author’s italics” (p. 38). Each realm, individual and collective, is shaped by the other, and in the context of larger social factors. Boud (2010) agreed with Fook that reflection in the workplace setting must encompass the individual, the team, the organization and the larger systems of which the organization is part.

**Reflective practices and organizational improvement**

The act of reflection, individually and with others in an organization, may be seen as central to the process of organizational learning and change (Senge, 2006). Reflection allows us to become aware of and critically review our mental models. This is crucial especially for key decision-makers, because, according to Senge, “Those models, if unexamined, limit an organization’s range of actions to what is familiar and what is comfortable” (p. 176).

Dialogue, wherein those engaged are willing to be vulnerable to the ideas and influence of others, as opposed to discussion, where ideas are presented and defended, is a necessary aspect of uncovering mental models. Meaningful and productive dialogue amongst team members is built upon the practice of personal reflection (Senge, 2006).

Senge (2006) made it clear that while individuals learn all the time, this does not necessarily translate to organizational learning and change. He emphasized the importance of individual reflection as a necessary part of working and learning collaboratively in teams. It is
the team learning and actions that can “establish the tone and set the standard for learning together for the larger organization” (p. 219).

In review, the role of reflection is well-documented in adult learning theories, and has taken its place in workplace learning situations. Self-reflection can be seen as a necessary step for individual learning and growth, as well as a pre-condition for meaningful communication, learning and change initiatives at an organizational level. Individual employees reflecting, communicating and working with others can form the basis for positive and significant improvements in an organization.

Chapter Summary

An exploration of how best life could be viewed in terms of quality of life was linked to scholarly works advocating the need for shared understandings of the organization’s mission statement. Next, ideas about change in complex organizations were compared and contrasted. Lastly, literature on employee participation in change was considered through the practices of self-reflection and reflecting with others. This literature review may enhance understanding of this study’s topic, findings and recommendations, and the factors which may shape the process of initiating change from within a complex organization. The study methodology and approach is the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

Inquiry Approach

This section describes how ideas and information were drawn from employees of SACLA using a qualitative approach. The appropriateness of action research for this project is discussed along with an explanation of the choice of participants. The primary methods, survey and group interview are outlined as well as ethical considerations particular to this inquiry. Included also is an overview of how the data was analyzed.

A qualitative approach was used for this project, informed by a social constructivist perspective. The social constructivist perspective is based on the assumption that knowledge of a social group or organization is constructed by the individuals interacting with other individuals of the group within the context of the larger society (Glesne, 2011). Individuals develop meanings for their lives and work, and these individual meanings can be learned and examined. A researcher’s role when considering a specific situation is to gather information about how individuals understand that situation, and look for patterns of meaning (Cresswell, 2003). The patterns of meaning for a portion of the group can give useful information about the thoughts and actions of the larger group (Glesne, 2011).

Action research fits within the social constructivist perspective, in that it engages the people who are directly affected by a situation to move forward to possible solutions (Stringer, 2007). Action research is a broadly used term that describes practices based on the principles of stakeholder participation, experiential data collection and is primarily geared towards organizational change (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). A hallmark of action research is engagement at the first, second and third person levels. This inquiry fits these criteria through my own
learning during the process (first level), opportunities for employees to grow in their practice (second level), and by serving as an example for organizational change for similar agencies (third level). The intent of the inquiry is to provide a collaborative process for growth from the personal to community levels (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010).

This research project was founded on the following key question: How can Southern Alberta Community Living Association help all employees to enact the mission to support persons with developmental disabilities to “live their best lives and pursue their dreams”? (SACLA, n.d., Mission Statement). Further questions sought to find information about employee perspectives on their concept of a best life, what factors help or hinder employees in their support of persons with developmental disabilities, how employees enact the mission statement, and what suggestions they have for SACLA to help employees enact the mission.

Research questions were designed from an appreciative stance. In appreciative inquiry, the use of positive questions is acknowledged to encourage dialogue and open possibilities for transformative action within an organization (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2001). Though the topic evolved from the initial identification of a problem within the organization, the focus was on discovering how employees fulfill the mission of the organization and in seeking their input about how the organization can support them. Reflective questions were also used, with the hope that self-reflection as a strategy may continue to serve the personal and professional development of the participants (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010).

This inquiry also fits with Schein’s (1999) process consultation model in that by making the space for reflection and discussion, employees may wish to continue to work with each other in this way after the inquiry is complete. According to Schein, the process of people working
together may be more important than the tasks on which they are actually working.

Qualitative data was collected during this inquiry. However, in order to provide a baseline of information for possible future organizational action, some simple demographic data was aggregated. The study was designed to learn about the real experience of the participants in order to lay the groundwork for meaningful organizational change (Stringer, 2007).

Participants

Stakeholder groups of SACLA are many, as the organization is part of the larger system in Alberta that supports persons with developmental disabilities to live in their communities. Stakeholders include persons with developmental disabilities, guardians and families of persons with developmental disabilities, employees and board members of SACLA and other support agencies, Persons with Developmental Disabilities South Alberta Community Board, and members of the Lethbridge community. Ideally, a project based on change within a community-based organization would engage all stakeholders in the research process (Stringer, 2007). The limited time frame of this project prompted a decision to narrow the scope of the inquiry to employee groups.

Participants for the first stage of the study, the survey, were drawn from employees of the organization at all levels. Approximately 250 employees were invited to participate. There were 41 respondents to the survey resulting in 38 fully completed surveys. The survey gathered data from community support workers, team leaders, contractors, administrative staff, coordinators and directors of the organization.

Three large group intervention activities were scheduled. All 23 Team Leaders were invited to participate in one large group intervention with 11 attending. Approximately 90 CSWs
were invited to participate in their choice of two other group interventions. Of those, 14 CSWs chose to participate. Though not planned to be a stratified sample, those who participated were based at a cross-section of worksites. If more than 40 CSWs per activity had expressed interest in participating, a selection would have been made based on the principles of stratified sampling, where the various worksite groups are heterogeneous in nature, but each specific group is viewed as homogenous (Adams, Kahn, Raeside & White, 2007). The technique is intended to promote somewhat balanced participation from as many worksites as possible (Gobo, 2004), though for the purposes of this study, participants were not considered to specifically share the views of their worksite co-workers.

A Best Lives Project Advisory Group was formed to guide the action planning phase of the inquiry. This team consisted of the Executive Director who is the project sponsor, three coordinators, four team leaders, and four direct support workers. Their participation in this meeting phase centered upon developing appropriate recommendations to move forward with organizational change initiatives. Data were not collected at this phase, but discussion about appropriate next steps became the framework for the inquiry recommendations. The on-going engagement of the team members was intended to be an integral part of the usefulness of the project as the organization moves towards implementing change.

**Inquiry Methods**

There were two main tools involved in data gathering. These tools, survey and large group intervention included elements of both an appreciative and a reflective approach.
Data collection tools

Survey

The survey is an appropriate way to gather individual data from a potentially large number of participants in a brief period of time. Though Stringer (2007) believes that the use of a survey early in data collection is of limited value, he does acknowledge that it is useful in including a broad range of people. With the limited time frame to complete this project, the survey was successfully used to engage a cross-section of employees working in all authority levels of the organization.

Participants were asked to say why they chose to do the survey before providing demographic information. The survey solicited information about employees’ understanding of their own best life, what helps and hinders them in doing their job well, as well as their suggestions for organizational improvement (see Appendix B).

The reflective nature of some of the survey questions was designed to promote further self-awareness of personal actions on the part of employees that participated. By independently engaging in the activity with the knowledge that their ideas and information could lead to positive change within the organization, it was hoped that employees may have felt a deepened sense of commitment to the mission and values of the organization.

Large group intervention

The second data gathering method, large group intervention, was completed with two different groups of employees. Team Leaders were invited to participate in one intervention, while CSWs were invited to participate in a choice of one of two other scheduled interventions. The large group intervention tool used was the interview matrix. It was used with the intention of
gathering a large amount of information from a potentially large number of interviewees. Each participant was given a question to ask individually of three people, while they in turn were asked three different questions by three other participants. Once the rounds of questions were complete, participants formed groups based on the question that they asked in order to discuss, sort and theme the data.

Large group intervention methods such as the interview matrix were designed to engage whole systems, and thus included participants at all levels of the organizational hierarchy (Bunker & Alban, 2002). Though the group interventions in this study involved only those at the same level of authority in the organization, due to ethical considerations associated with power relationships, there was good potential for establishing the basis for development of ongoing learning, communication and support networks within the employee group. Large group intervention methods such as the interview matrix are seen as having transformational potential, in that they engage participants in ways that encourage learning (Block, 2009).

Learning about how others view particular concepts, thinking about one’s own perspectives and discussing possibilities are powerful reasons for using a large-group intervention method as a tool towards organizational change (Martin, 2001). Questions used in this activity were designed to promote self and mutual awareness of alignment with the organization’s mission statement (see Appendix C). Through interviewing each other and having the opportunity to discuss and theme the data that they gathered, it was hoped that employees may have gained greater appreciation for the work of their colleagues, as well as ideas and support.
Study conduct

All employees were invited to participate in the survey and their completion of the survey implied consent (see Appendix D). As computer usage and competency is not a requirement for direct support workers employed by SACLA, every employee had the choice of completing a hard copy or an on-line format of the survey. A hard copy of both the invitation to participate and the survey was distributed to each employee via a mail-out. Participants who completed the paper survey had the choice of bringing it to a drop box in a sealed envelope at the central office, or to mail it directly to the researcher. A link was also provided to complete the survey on line. As participants did not identify themselves and SACLA staff did not view the completed surveys, anonymity of the responses was maintained.

The second data gathering tool was the large group intervention. Invitations for the large group intervention were given to CSWs with the exception of those that worked with my husband (see Appendix E). Team Leaders, with the exception of my husband were invited to participate in a separate activity. All those who participated gave consent for the information to be used as outlined (see Appendix F).

Upon arrival at the large group intervention activity, participants were asked to sign an attendance sheet in order to verify their participation for compensation at their regular rate of pay. At this time they were also asked to indicate whether they had completed or intended to complete the survey. There was some informal discussion time before and during a meal provided by SACLA.

Once the meal was complete, participants were given a brief introduction to the project and encouraged to ask questions. They were then organized into groups to ask and answer
questions of each other. These interviews occurred in six sessions of four minutes each to allow for recording of the responses on paper. Following the interviewing matrix, participants were grouped by the interview question that they had asked and given the task of theming. Participants discussed, sorted and organized their responses to the questions and recorded their information on chart paper. Though there were less than 12 people at each large group intervention activity, I employed the matrix format. This decision was made in the interest of providing an opportunity for CSWs and Team Leaders to have direct discussion opportunities.

Before closing the interview activity, participants were asked to individually write answers to self-reflective questions. Martin (2001) writes about the importance of action and reflection as an integral part of the action research process. Though this inquiry is but a small slice of what an ideal full organizational action research project might look like, setting the stage for self-reflection among employees aligns with the intention of action research, which is to engage people directly in shaping the quality of their work (Stringer, 2007).

The data from the survey and the large group interventions were collected and sorted, then themed and analyzed by the researcher. Findings were formulated, and along with the review of literature, organizational and important sector documents, they formed the basis of the draft inquiry conclusions. The advisory group then met to review them and consider what actions might reasonably follow from the conclusions. The recommendations contained in this thesis reflect preliminary ideas of the advisory group. The input and engagement of the advisory team may be important in the success of the organizational change initiatives.

Stringer (2007) describes rigor in action research as the processes and methods that show the trustworthiness of the outcomes. To be regarded as trustworthy, the outcomes must not rely
on simplistic analysis of data, or be a vehicle for the ideas and outlook of the research or the organization (2007). For this project, the trustworthiness of the final thesis will be demonstrated by triangulation of methods and sources, as well as by the authenticity of the process.

Triangulation involves collecting data by different means and from different sources, in an effort to find “convergence on the truth” (Adams et al., 2007, p. 113). Triangulation has been achieved by using two different formal data collection methods, research observation notes, presenting multiple theoretical perspectives, and by incorporating multiple data sources. The anonymous survey allowed for employees at various authority levels in the organization to participate while employees from a variety of worksites participated in the large group interventions, thus providing two data collection methods and multiple data sources (Glesne, 2011). Evidence to support conclusions has also been drawn from organization and government documents.

The input of the Best Lives Advisory Group supported the authenticity of the findings and recommendations. The group assisted with what Coghlan and Brannick (2010) consider imperative; to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible. Because the raw data is unavailable to the reader, Eisner (1997) asserts that the interpretation of the data is entirely in the hands of the researcher. For this reason, the evidence of trustworthiness is extremely important.

This study used various tools for data collection, and gathered both qualitative and demographic data. The purpose of collecting demographic data was to form a backdrop, or context to the research, rather than to be analyzed using statistical procedures. Aside from the demographic information, the survey contained one closed question in the form of a checklist as is typical in the gathering of quantitative data. However, this question style was used as a way to
simplify and clarify the question rather than to “…statistically analyze scores….in order to answer research questions or to test hypotheses” (Cresswell & Clark, 2007, p.6). The majority of the questions, both in the survey and in the large group interview activities were open-ended; a format typical of qualitative research. Further, this project was clearly qualitative in approach, in that the object of the research was to collect ideas and input from the participants in order to make organizational change.

**Data analysis**

The purpose of data analysis is to organize and present information that can be comprehended and, in action research, be used. Stringer (2007) described the process as one of “reflection and interpretation, providing participants and other stake holding audiences with new ways of thinking about the issues and events investigated” (p. 95).

Qualitative data analysis can be approached in a variety of ways, much of which may not be determined beforehand. In an action research setting, presumptions about what will be found may be misleading as the purpose is to ask the questions and see what comes in response. However, in the survey portion of this inquiry, one question was framed specifically with commonly used terms in quality of life tools, such as that of Schalock and Keith (1993). It was reasonable to expect continuation of those concepts in the more open-ended response areas of the survey.

At the outset, similarity of words and responses within each data collection method and group were searched for. For example, common words and concepts arose in the data from each large group intervention activity. Likewise, many common themes and terms were evident amongst the survey responses. Then, comparisons were made between groups and methods.
Stringer (2007) described the two main processes in data “distillation” as categorizing and coding, and analyzing key experiences (p. 98). This involved looking for and compiling word repetitions, key words and phrases, and then further identifications and sortings of individual words and phrases within the data compilations (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). For the step of analyzing key experiences, Glesne (2011) suggested keeping a log or memo writing as a tool for keeping track of the researcher’s thoughts while doing the layers of analysis. As she pointed out, writing helps many people to think, and so this tool may be used to track “links across the data” (Glesne, 2011, p.189).

The challenging task was to arrange the data into categories that become apparent, rather than categories that the researcher preferred. The data were compared and themed based on similarity of words and concepts, before referring to the initial theming done by the participants as part of the interview matrix activity. Respecting the work in theming done by each particular group of participants was difficult as the task of analysis is interpretation, but the purpose was to frame it in ways that clearly represent the perspectives of the participants (Stringer, 2007). Stringer described this through the phrase “verbatim principle [author’s italics]” meaning the use of “terms and concepts drawn from the words of the participants themselves” (p. 99) as a strategy for the researcher to avoid organizing the data according to their own interpretation. While qualitative researchers typically want multiple perspectives, Glesne (2011) acknowledged the difficulty of recognizing and working outside of our own frameworks. Once the data was themed and draft conclusions drawn, the Best Lives Advisory Group was convened to consider the conclusions and begin the action planning process.
Ethical Issues

Though I had not had a position of authority within the sponsor organization for three years, there were ethical issues with respect to influence to be addressed within the scope of this inquiry. As a former team leader, and now researcher within the organization, participants may have perceived a power imbalance between them and me. For this reason, it was important to take a leave of absence from employment with SACLA. A perceived power imbalance may have inhibited participation by former co-workers. Additionally, because my husband was also employed by the sponsor organization as a team leader, he and workers on his team were excluded from participation in the group activities. Because the survey participants remain anonymous, any employee of the organization was able to participate.

For all data collection, the premise for participation was through free and informed consent. Royal Roads University Ethics Policy (2011) clearly states that this consent must involve knowledge of the purpose of the research and procedures, possible harms and benefits, time frame, researcher information and how the research is to be used. In terms of the survey, the anonymity aspect protected the identification of those who participated. By excluding co-workers of my husband from the large group intervention, as well as other employees who have influence over direct support workers and team leaders, employees were free to participate or not. The large group interventions were held away from the office without any employees of other hierarchical levels present. Though it was not possible to keep the names of those who participated anonymous due to being paid for their time, responses could not be linked to any individual persons.

As for the research tools themselves, other ethical issues were considered. By providing a
choice of paper or electronic survey completion it was hoped that there was no real or perceived exclusion of any employees because of comfort level with the methods. As a certain level of literacy is required for employment, it is not thought that these methods would have excluded anyone based on literacy competency.

As the interview matrix involved large group interaction, there was no expectation of anonymous participation. The CSW group had no supervisory influence over each other. Similarly, Team Leaders had no supervisory influence over each other. Though it is recognized that there may have been power imbalances based on personal networks, length of employment, or union involvement, it is not possible to plan for these complex interpersonal situations in the scope of this inquiry. Because anonymity could not be guaranteed, this activity represented more than minimal risk to the participants. Any employees who choose to participate in the large group interview activity provided prior consent by responding to the researcher via email or telephone as outlined in the invitation and consent forms (Appendices E and F).

**Project Deliverables**

Once approved by the sponsor, academic supervisor and the thesis committee, the final report will be provided to the sponsor organization. Findings will be presented to the participants and any other employees of the sponsor organization in a manner to be worked out with the project sponsor. This could include a verbal presentation of findings in a meeting environment, project summary and/or thesis posted on the website, and/or a written summary sent to individual employees. The project will be available to Royal Roads University Archives and the Library and Archives Canada. The final report may be shared with Alberta Council of Disability Services
and other organizations that support persons with developmental disabilities in Alberta as well as Alberta Ministry of Human Services. Results may also be published as a journal article.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 described the qualitative approach used in the study, along with the data gathering methods. Ethical considerations were summarized, followed by a description of the data analysis process. Also, potential methods of research study distribution and usages were outlined. In the chapter that follows, study findings are grouped into five main areas with these areas forming the basis for the three study conclusions regarding organizational mission, employee participation, and communication and team relationships.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research study was founded on the exploration of the following question: How can SACLA help all employees to enact the mission to support persons with developmental disabilities to “live their best lives and pursue their dreams”? (SACLA, n.d., Mission Statement).

Further questions that helped to guide and focus this exploration included:

1. How do employees understand the words ‘best life’?
2. How do employees currently enact the mission statement?
3. What factors act as barriers or enablers in employees’ ability to enact the mission statement?
4. What changes can SACLA make to help all employees support persons with developmental disabilities to live their best lives?

Included in this chapter are findings arising from the data, conclusions and discussion based on literature and relevant documents.

Study Findings

In addition to the main question and sub-questions that formed the basis for the data gathering, survey respondents were asked to say why they chose to complete the survey. As well, interview matrix participants were asked to consider the value of self-reflection in their work and provide feedback on the project. The data resulting from all of these questions, along with my observation notes, are the foundation of the findings and conclusions included in this chapter. The over-arching themes of dedication, communication, and organizational mission, are the common threads that ran among the findings of this study and formed the basis for the study conclusions. The findings and discussions are clustered under five main topic areas:

1. Employee dedication;
2. Best life;
3. Employee support of independence;
4. Supporting employee effectiveness; and,
5. The role of reflection.

Each finding is supported by data and anonymous quotations from the survey, the group interview activities and research notes.

**Finding 1. Employee dedication**

Overall the findings have revealed that employees are dedicated to supporting individuals to live their best lives. The dedication that SACLA employees have for their work and their interest in enhancing the work of the organization has been evident. Individual employees have taken the time to comment about their interest and support for this inquiry at organization events and in the community. For example one person noted that, “I really appreciated the opportunity to give my input and connect with other CSWs. I am interested to see how it will improve things,” (Anonymous, personal communication, September 15, 2012).

The initial question on the survey asked why the respondent decided to complete the survey. Though some chose not to answer, the most common response (15/35) expressed the desire to make a difference by making statements such as this example, “I wanted to do my part in making SACLA a stronger organization.” The next most common response had to do with a desire to give input (10/35), such as “I would like to take the opportunity to revisit the mission statement and to identify how to put these thoughts into productive action” and “Great opportunity to share ideas.” The following notable survey response, “not living my ‘Best Life,’”
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does not neatly fall into any category but reveals a deep level of association with the mission statement and may indicate a need for more employee support options.

A high level of engagement during the group interview activities was evidenced by the apparent ease of discussion, elevated sound level during conversation and difficulty in limiting discussion. This indicated to me that participants were interested in the topic and questions. Notably, participants appeared most focused when telling their personal stories about what they did well to support the independence of individuals.

One participant expressed her belief in the importance of each employee taking the responsibility to work together to make a difference, rather than relying on changes being made at the administrative level. Others saw solutions mainly residing in the realm of administration and leadership and were eager to have their ideas heard, as shown by one comment: “to help improve quality of life for individuals and help management see concerns of staff.” The interest displayed through the comments and responses of participants show that there was a sense of importance about the work that people are doing and an eagerness to advance the effectiveness of the organization.

Finding 2. Best life

There were commonalities and significant differences in what employees’ consider to be most important for their own best lives. The commonalities across employee groups were straightforward to identify through the survey tool. In contrast, it became clear when analyzing the data from the interview matrix activities that TLs and CSWs as separate groups had different commonalities in what areas were most important to them for their quality of life.

Commonalities across employee groups
Survey results showed that the most commonly valued area of life amongst respondents was that of relationships with family and friends (40/40). The second area was that of self-determination (37/40), while the third was that of emotional well-being (32/40). The fourth and fifth most commonly valued areas were that of physical well-being (29/40) and personal development (24/40). Lower ranking were spiritual and material well-being, while the lowest scores were equality and rights (10/40) and social inclusion (8/40).

**Differences between employee groups**

In the interview matrix activities, participants were individually asked the open-ended question, “What does best life mean to you?” They were not provided a list of areas to choose from and did not have to decide on their five most important areas. Later, a group composed of those that had asked the other participants this question, was asked to identify the top five areas based on the responses they had collected. TLs and CSWs had three overlapping areas on their list of five most important: relationships with family and friends, self-determination, and having a purpose or making a difference in life.

The TLs other most common important areas were work-life balance and feeling appreciated. CSWs’ two other most common areas were health and well-being including physical, spiritual and emotional aspects, and having fun in life.

**Finding 3. Support of independence**

Employees had stories to tell about their support of individuals to take independent action in their lives. There was similarity in the stories and actions of employees but also difference in the language used to describe how they offer the support. Participants in the interview matrix activities were asked to tell about a time when they felt that they or a co-worker truly supported
an individual’s independence. They shared stories about what they did well. Similarities emerged through the interviewing and theming activity, while differences became apparent through examination of the written interview responses and researcher observation.

**Similarities**

In observing the exchanges between people when this question was asked, I noticed that the storytellers tended to become quite animated, with facial expressions that indicated positive feelings. Stories were told about specific instances of independent choice and actions in many aspects of persons’ lives. There was the knowledge that seemingly common actions promote independence, in that participants encouraged individuals to complete tasks such as “start and operate his own dishwasher”, “manage his own budget and shop independently” or “to feed themselves.” The understanding that these daily acts of independence could be life changing was apparent as indicated in the following comment from a participant, “When an individual poured tea into his own cup. He now anticipates this activity. It took two years to accomplish this independence.” Stories about supporting independence in major life choices were also told, such as “Assisted an individual to go from a roommate companion to living independently” and “Helped make it possible for a person to retire when that was her wish.”

The groups were asked to decide upon the five main themes from amongst the responses to this question. The list of themes identified by the TLs and the CSWs were almost identical, even to the choice of words. Both groups chose to theme this question by using words and concepts to describe how support for independence was given, rather than what was done. Phrases such as, “thinking outside the box”, “providing knowledge of choices and resources” and
“encouragement to do own tasks” were listed by the groups. CSWs also included “listen to what people are really saying” to their theme list of how they supported people’s independence.

**Differences**

There were some differences between the stories that TLs and CSWs told. TL stories about supporting independence often came from their leadership position (10/18). Examples of how TLs have guided their staff teams to support independence are that one participant told about how she encouraged “staff to not do a task [which allowed] the individual to make his own lunch” while another encouraged staff to not interfere when an individual got into an argument with a friend. TLs also facilitated independence in financial choices as was evidenced by “supporting an individual to have her own possessions and buy her own furniture” while another TL supported an individual to take his or her “dream trip.” CSW responses tended to come from a person to person perspective such as “focusing on strengths”, “encouraging someone to try something new”, and “encouraging someone to take responsibility in their own home.”

When TLs described their support of independence, the words used were, “encouraging”, “supporting”, “suggesting”, “promoting”, “assisting”, and “helping.” While most of the CSW responders used the same words, the following words and phrases were also recorded, “letting”, “giving them choices” and “having the individual do……” During one of the CSW interview matrix activities a participant was heard to describe how he “allowed” an individual to make a choice. Another participant responded by saying that it was not up to him to allow or not allow an individual to do anything. These examples of differences in language may indicate some differences amongst employees in understanding about how to support independence.
Finding 4: Supporting employee effectiveness

Employees knew what they needed to do their jobs well, and they had a wealth of ideas about how SACLA could help them to support individuals to live their best lives. The findings regarding supporting employee effectiveness combined data from questions about what helps and hinders employees in their work, and what suggestions they had for change in the organization. These questions were asked both in the survey and during the interview matrix activities. Survey respondents were asked to provide three suggestions for organizational change, whereas the interview participants had no limitation to the number of suggestions they could give.

Helps and hindrances

The questions of what helps and what hinders them in their work gave respondents and participants two angles from which to consider what they felt they needed in order to do their jobs well. In many instances they were two sides of the same issue. Some answered the question in terms of what helps or hinders them currently in their work, and some answered in a theoretical sense. It was not always possible to know which sense was intended. Many hindrance responses as well as suggestions for organizational change appeared to refer to specific incidents and situations.

Employees had a variety of responses to the related questions of “What things help you in your work?” and “What hinders you in your work?” Survey responders where asked to provide three answers to each question, while interview participants were asked the open-ended questions. The 119 survey responses regarding what helps and the 120 responses regarding what
hinders employees in their work commonly fell into three categories: factors that related to teamwork, factors reliant upon the organization itself, and personal factors.

Survey responses indicated that support and effective teamwork, or lack thereof, amongst staff teams including coordinators, was the most common factor in their ability to do their job well. Out of the total of 239 responses, 94 indicated that positive support from, and clear and effective communication with, co-workers, team leaders and coordinators was important. Respondents wrote that what helped them was, “open communication and good team rapport”, “support from management” and “having positive feedback from management and co-workers.” Conversely, important hindrances included, “My team not working towards common goals” and “lack of support from my supervisor”.

In the theming after the group interview matrix activities, support of team was also identified as important. TLs identified that improved support, leadership and mentorship from management and coordinators would help them to do their job better, and also noted that a lack of appropriately trained and competent staff was a hindrance to their teams. CSWs said that team work and effective communication with co-workers was very helpful, while a lack of emotional support and lack of common goals within the team were important hindrances.

Personal factors ranked highly in survey respondents’ ability to do their jobs well (61/119). Factors such as support networks of family and friends (6), as well as their own personal characteristics such as empathy, care and compassion helped them in their work (9). The employees’ personal connections with the individuals that they supported were important (7) as well as their own experience and knowledge (5). Ability to balance work and personal life (4), and passion and dedication to their work (6) were also common factors. Personal factors were
rarely cited as being hindrances, except in the areas of work-life balance, conflict between employees and stress (9/119). Depending on the source of the stress, conflict or lack of balance, which was not indicated in the responses, these factors might be considered to result from the issues within the team or organization. Though personal factors ranked highly as being helpful in the survey responses, only the TL group identified a personal factor, self-care, as being a common theme among the interview responses. Similarly, TLs identified burnout as being a common hindrance.

Organizational factors that survey respondents felt helped them in their work (11/119) included flexibility in scheduling, provision of information and resources, a clear understanding of their role and expectations through documentation, and leadership within the organization. Organizational factors figured prominently in what people felt hindered them in their work (51/120). Seven respondents identified having too many people to support while others reported a lack of resources and information (5). Unclear procedures with little guidance and direction, and lack of consistency between coordinators were factors identified in four responses each. Other hindrances in the organizational realm, though not frequently reported, included “lack of support and resources for working with an aging population”, “lack of proper remuneration”, “bullying” in the workplace, “high staff turnover” and “bureaucracy”.

Theming conducted by TLs in the matrix indicated several organizational factors that would be helpful: having more support for and access to resources, having more knowledgeable staff and having more flexibility in their positions. TLs felt that hindrances included inadequately educated or trained staff, lack of flexibility and a poor balance of direct support and administrative responsibilities in their own positions. CSWs identified that having more
knowledge about individuals and procedures would be helpful as well as having a larger pool of workers. For CSWs at the group interview activity, lack of workshops about specific disorders and things such as team-building was a hindrance. CSWs also felt that the agency did not take all levels of ability and need into account, resulting in unrealistic expectations and goals for some individuals.

**Suggestions for change**

Survey takers provided 98 responses to the question “Please describe the three most important changes that SACLA could make to help you, in your work, support persons with developmental disabilities to live their best lives.” Approximately 65 different ideas for organizational improvement emerged from the data; some were general in nature such as the comment “new initiatives,” whereas others were quite specific such as this one example of “TLs should do the paperwork at the office instead of in the home of the individual.” The most common specific suggestion was for SACLA to set up a common database and information sharing system (7/65). This would enable “scheduling, file management, uniform documentation etc.” to be centralized and accessible for employees. Other suggestions could be grouped into four other general categories: teamwork and communication; staffing; goals, mission and values; and, resources and community involvement.

Expressions of the need for improved teamwork and communication were at the core of about 24 survey responses. One respondent expressed a desire for “Clear, consistent communication from all levels of staff…from ED to management to frontline.” Another wrote, about needing “more caring and supportive coordinators and team leaders; a reliable team you can count on.” Specific suggestions in this area included, “Provide readily accessed
Staffing was clearly a common concern, as 35 respondents had comments and ideas to share in the areas of education, hiring, training, remuneration and expectations. Two people thought that educational background was important, and seven thought that training and professional development could be improved. Two respondents wanted the organization to improve the quality of staff in general by developing “a better process of determining what staff are willing and able to do to support people to live their best lives, as some staff refuse to support individuals to the best of their abilities” and by having “More stringent hiring practices at all levels.” One respondent offered a suggestion for motivating employees:

There are no real incentives for staff to go the extra mile in their support. Our union doesn't support a performance-based grid and the Stay N Play is completely random. We need to have some type of performance-based bonus system for the extra money floating around out there.

Comments and suggestions were made in the general area of organizational goals and mission. They included such things as, “set up goals for organization for next 5, 10, 20 years” and to have a “published 5 year plan.” Three respondents commented on the mission and how it is upheld. One said, “Give as much time and attention to how well staff support the individuals to take care of their basic needs of food/shelter/warmth etc. as to the community/spiritual/social etc.” and that the organization should “meet clients where they are really at instead of imposing an fantasy ideal of what we think their best life should be.”

The fourth general common area of suggestion was around resources and community. This included resources for individuals and staff, as well as different ways of looking at community engagement. There were suggestions for sexual education resources for individuals,
as well as employment resources. Two people suggested that the organization support more events for individuals. Mentioned also was a request for more resources specifically to do with supporting an aging population.

Theming results from the group matrix correlate closely with the survey results, but varied somewhat between TLs and CSWs. When asked, TLs identified their common themes. TLs felt that in terms of teamwork and communication there needed to be more clearly defined roles and responsibilities between coordinators and residential staff, more support from management, and that all team members needed to be held responsible for doing their jobs. They felt it very important to hire better qualified and trained staff, and that this could be accomplished with higher rates of remuneration. Also in the realm of staffing they felt that workloads needed to be reduced for TLs. They also wanted more training available for community resources and all aspects of documentation.

CSWs identified a need for better communication between CSWs, TLs and Coordinators, as well as more administrative support. As with the TLs, CSWs felt that they needed clearer definitions of job roles and responsibilities within specific house settings, as well as between TLs, Coordinators and CSWs. They felt that more training for TLs, better orientations for all staff and better information regarding individuals was needed. They also wanted more support to assist individuals to access community resources and support for individuals who are aging or need different levels of support.

**Finding 5: The role of reflection**

Employees involved in the interview matrix activities identified an appreciation of the value of self-reflection and the opportunity for discussion with colleagues. Interview participants
were asked how often they were given, or took the time to consider, their actions in relation to how they supported individuals. All 27 TL and CSW responses indicated that they took time, usually their own, to reflect on how they do their job. Eight TLs said they took the time on a daily basis. One TL wrote, “Every night when I’m done my shift I can’t sleep going over and over in my head how to improve things for the gentlemen.” Other comments from TLs also indicated a daily or very frequent practice of self-reflection, “I consider constantly – at work, at home” and “On a daily basis – with every decision”. Five said that they took the time sometimes or not often enough, with one TL writing that “I take the time when there is a crisis.”

Responses from CSWs also indicated a frequent practice of self-reflection (8), though six indicated that they did it sometimes, or not enough: “Not as often as I should” and “I don’t very often as I have been doing many different houses so it is difficult at times to truly consider how better to support an individual.” One person responded that she reflected “When filling in the daily logs…Did I help the individuals towards their goals? Was there something I could change?”

Nine TLs responded to the question about whether they learned anything new about themselves from the activity. Six of the nine indicated that they found similar concerns with colleagues, “Others feel the same way I do” and that “the frustration I am feeling seems to be across the board.”

Some CSWs (4/13) responded to the question about what they learned by indicating that they now knew others had similar ideas, concerns or experiences. Other answers revealed a higher level of self-awareness (6/13) as indicated by responses such as, “As time goes on I realize that I can be part of the solution”, “I feel more open to conversation”, “I want to become
more pro-active” and “I feel less defeated then when I left my place of employment this morning.” In reflecting upon the earlier question about what best life means one participant wrote, “Best life to me meant self-esteem. A good self-esteem helps you have a good life no matter what you go through. That was a surprise to me.”

In responding to the question about the value of self-reflection in supporting persons to live their best lives TLs and CSWs had many significant comments such as “I learn from each situation – recognize that I could always do things better” and “On days where I may have ‘slacked’ reflection would help me to work harder for their independence.” One TL observed that “It is only an act of God that makes me different from the individuals I support…so I always consider how I would like to be treated in a situation.”

**Study Conclusions**

SACLA employees are dedicated and concerned about doing their jobs well. They have taken the opportunity to make their voices heard and they know what they need. Though they have different ideas about what their own best lives look like, they are interested in seeing efforts made to improve their effectiveness and the effectiveness of the organization as a whole. Opportunities exist to support organizational improvement. Study participants have provided a multitude of ideas for how SACLA can assist them to support individuals to live their best lives.

Based on the study findings, three overarching conclusions have emerged. It is hoped that with the engagement of all levels of SACLA employees, recommendations based on these conclusions will be considered and implemented. The conclusions are as follows:

1. Shared understanding of SACLA’s mission statement and employee dialogue about how to enact it may enhance the overall effectiveness of the organization;
2. The creation of space and systems for employee engagement in strengthening the organization is crucial; and

3. Current communication patterns and team relationships within SACLA indicate opportunities to improve support for employees.

Further explanation of each conclusion is offered in the following section, in the context of relevant literature.

**Conclusion 1. A shared understanding of SACLA’s mission statement and how employee actions support its enactment may enhance the overall effectiveness of the organization.**

The enthusiasm of participants in the group interviews to share their stories of supporting independence was a sign of common purpose. There is a common understanding or assumption that when employees support independence, they are supporting individuals to live their best lives. This shared assumption is important in unifying the efforts of employees. Shared purpose and vision in organizations is widely understood to be important, and is written about in the literature of leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Senge, 2006; Weisbord, 2004; Wheatley, 2005).

The differences in how people view their own best life in this inquiry may be an indicator of significant differences in how people view the best life of those that they support. The World Health Organization (1997) defines the term “Quality of Life” as “individuals’ perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (p. 1). The concepts of quality of life and best life are closely related in that they depend upon a persons’ perception of their own
life. Because these concepts are subjective, the argument could be made that it is unrealistic to be able to gauge someone else’s quality of life without having direct information and communication from the person being supported.

While SACLA employees understand the concept of a best life and are able to articulate it for themselves, a shared understanding about how to support individuals in their best lives should be cultivated. One group interview participant observed that their role was to support individuals in “living the life the person we are supporting wants to live; not our interpretation of what their life should look like.” Concern about this discrepancy was voiced through the survey: There is a “lack of open mindedness by management in what ‘a best life’ could mean at different stages of existence.” Perhaps support teams would benefit from having a clearer process of how to work with individuals to find out what they envision their best life to be.

Without a common understanding, employees may be working at cross-purposes, and in fact working counter to the mission of the organization. Enacting the mission depends on a shared belief in what is possible and desired on a person-by-person basis, as well as a shared understanding of how employees contribute. As discussed in Finding 3, written responses and observation notes indicate that there is not a common understanding about supporting independence. When some employees describe their role as “letting” or “allowing” individuals to have choices, then it is clear that opportunities must be created for greater alignment with the mission of the organization.

In this study, the main participating groups were TLs and CSWs. Ideally, organization-wide dialogue activities would occur, wherein employees in every role would have the opportunity to work together to understand how their work contributes to SACLA’s ability to
enact the mission statement. The value that SACLA adds to the community may be greatly enhanced through making efforts to ensure that each person in the organization is aligned in understanding and actions with the purpose of supporting persons with developmental disabilities to live their best lives.

**Conclusion 2: The creation of space and systems for employee engagement is crucial for the strengthening of the organization.**

SACLA employees know what they need in order to do their jobs well, and they have ideas, strengths, experience and skills to contribute to the success of the organization. That employees are committed to their work and have a desire to improve both themselves and SACLA was discussed in Finding 1. Their commitment is strength and can be capitalized upon. In order for employees to help strengthen an organization, mechanisms must be in place for them to give input and have their input valued. Further, their engagement in following through is needed for the success of any initiative. A potential downfall of using simple methods such as surveys and interviews is that once input has been given, the engagement may wane because “they do not encourage individual accountability” (Argyris, 1994, p. 77). Continuing the engagement of employees in change initiatives is crucial for the success of any initiatives as people are willing to support what they help create (Wheatley, 2005).

Survey respondents (10/41) wrote that they completed the survey because it was “a chance to have a voice – have my opinions heard.” Written, open-ended feedback after the group interview activities indicated that participants (11) were pleased to have the opportunity to give input such as, “Great – loved this forum” and “Thank you for finding ways in which SACLA could support us better.” They were eager for their input to be considered, “I hope this
comes to show through in SACLA” and “I hope this helps SACLA to better support its staff to help the individuals.” In addition to the positive and hopeful comments there was also an element of pessimism. This was apparent from comments made before and after the interviews, such as, “This is nice but it won’t do any good”, “we are asked for our input but then it isn’t used” and “It won’t make any difference.”

Strengthening organizations involves the people within at all levels thinking about what they do. The only sensible way to improve an organization is to “have our people work together in rethinking their own work” (Weisbord, 2004, p. 194). This kind of process can succeed with the full endorsement and support of the leadership of the organization. In doing so, an organization can help its employees to reaffirm their involvement and reaffirm the meaning in their work (Weisbord, 2004)

Wheatley (2005) discussed how the act of engaging people to work together promotes creativity. Her perspective was that no one person can really anticipate what will work to solve a problem or make positive changes. Thus, by inviting “everyone who cares” (p. 79) into the process, we can “harvest the invisible intelligence that runs through the organization” (p. 80).

Conclusion 3: Current communication patterns and team relationships within SACLA indicate opportunities to improve support for employees.

Survey and interview evidence shows a need for enhanced team relationships and better communication within the organization, as discussed in Finding 4. While employees were quite clearly able to identify what they require to do their jobs well, and have suggested many ways for SACLA to support them in this, investigation of existing barriers to effective communication and
support might be helpful. An examination of the flow of information from the perspectives of employees at various levels of the organization may assist in uncovering impediments.

Though not directly asked, some survey and interview data may hint at some of the barriers that exist. A lack of time, working too many hours, staffing issues and burnout were reported by a number of TLs (7) at the interview activity. Comments made by survey respondents when asked about hindrances also suggested an unrealistic workload or stress level; “being distracted or interrupted by people or situations that are not an emergency” and “mental fatigue.”

Systems for accessing information and support are in place as described in SACLA policies and procedures and through the management structure of the organization. These systems provide a framework through which communication and problem-solving occur, safety and support is given, and administrative functions are completed. There may be factors within the systems that impede communication and team relationships that result in lack of consistency and support from supervisors and coordinators.

Examining the systems, as well as the interpersonal relations of those who work within them is important in the process of working towards enhanced communication and team relationships. By focusing only on interpersonal relations within the SACLA systems, there is a risk of oversimplification of issues to be addressed, doing nothing to prevent them from reoccurring (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Similarly, Weisbord (2004) wrote about the importance of looking at the tasks under discussion at the same time as the processes rather than taking a narrow focus of interpersonal dynamics.
Chapter Summary

Action on these three conclusions may assist SACLA to more fully enact its mission. Research participants are interested in organizational improvement efforts and have enthusiasm and ideas to contribute. It may be that an organization-wide examination of the mission and an alignment in understanding is a critical early step to strengthening organizational relationships. This is important because as Wheatley (2005) observes that without shared beliefs and desires, there is no motivation to develop relationships.

The following chapter develops five specific recommendations based on the conclusions along with implications for SACLA and limitations to the inquiry.
CHAPTER FIVE: RECOMMENDATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Recommendations for the organization based on the study findings and conclusions are the focus of this chapter. These recommendations are discussed in relation to the five study findings and the three conclusions, and in terms of current scholarship in the field of organization systems and leadership. Potential implications of proceeding with or refraining from the implementation of the recommendations are suggested. Finally, limitations of the research study are examined.

Study Recommendations and Implications

The study recommendations are intended to be clear and sufficiently concrete upon which to formulate specific action plans, while providing the basis for further organizational development. Each one, if accepted, will need to be expanded upon and planned in accordance with current available time, personnel and financial resource costs balanced with potential gains. These recommendations have been prepared based on the study findings and conclusions, and after discussion and consultation with the organization sponsor. The recommendations have also been written in the context of the post-research phase meeting of the Best Lives Advisory Group.

The recommendations are as follows:

1. Establish an employee working group;
2. Initiate a system-wide examination of the mission statement;
3. Complete an analysis of current communication systems;
4. Establish regular large group learning opportunities; and
5. Improve baseline and on-going training opportunities.
**Recommendation 1: Establish an employee working group**

Establish a working group to include representatives from across the employee position levels to examine research findings and conclusions and develop initial action plans. The working group would be sponsored by the Executive Director and work under her direction. This working group could be based on the participants of the current Best Lives Advisory Group, and could expand and change to meet the needs and circumstances of the tasks at hand. Consider maintaining a working or advisory group as a continuous thread for long-term organizational enhancement.

An established and continuous working group could be a concrete mechanism by which to strengthen employee engagement and also serve to strengthen communication and team relationships between employees of different positions within the organization, as identified in study Conclusions 2 and 3. This recommendation specifically arises out of the findings that employees are dedicated, they know what they need, and have identified that opportunities for reflection and discussion are important.

A working group might capitalize on employee dedication, by engaging employees who are keenly interested in improving the effectiveness of their work and their organization, as was described in Finding 1. That employees have very clear ideas about what they need to do their work well was discussed in Finding 4. By giving them a voice in the direction of change in the organization their ideas as well as their dedication may become assets to the organization. A working group would entail that participants reflect on their roles within the context of the organization and engage in discussion with others, as referred to in Finding 5. By valuing and
promoting these actions within a core group of employees, a broader culture of engagement and learning may develop.

One of the benefits of working together as identified by Kouzes and Posner (2007) is the feeling of interdependence and trust that may arise when a group of people comes to know each other and build relationships. Bunker and Alban (2002) suggested that working in groups that cross organizational boundaries helps to shift perceptions from “they to we [author’s italics]” (p. 678). Another benefit of working in groups that encompass different levels within an organization is the engagement of different perspectives when looking at specific issues or problems to be addressed, as solutions usually lie within the organization (Schein, 1999; Weisbord, 2004; Wheatley, 2005). Choosing not to encourage the ideas and energy of a working group could represent a lost opportunity for important employee engagement and organizational enhancement.

**Recommendation 2: Initiate a system-wide examination of the mission statement**

Consider engaging the working group in planning and carrying out a system-wide examination of the mission statement. This recommendation coincides with the time when SACLA is set for a regular review of the mission, vision and supporting value statements (Sue Manery, personal communication, October 17, 2012). In the past this has been done through full stakeholder engagement in a large group setting. By using a large group intervention model that purposefully works towards common ground, diverse viewpoints as well as values and beliefs would be allowed to emerge and be acknowledged, before participants were moved to finding agreement (Bunker & Alban, 2002). This recommendation is supported by Conclusion 1, in that
such a process may allow stakeholders to consider what best life means to them and to the organization, on the way to reaffirming or redefining the existing statements or creating anew.

The working group could be tasked with the planning and execution of the large group intervention as far as their time and authority will allow. This could reinforce the value of their ideas and enthusiasm, enhance their working relationships and build leadership skills. Such an activity or activities would also provide an opportunity for reflection and discussion, as was identified as important in Finding 5. By continuing the practice of having the whole system gathered for this activity as advocated by Weisbord (2004), and connecting it with the committed energy of the working group drawn from all levels of the organization, the potential for meaningful engagement about the purpose and values of the organization may be maximized.

**Recommendation 3: Complete an analysis of current communication systems**

Initiate an analysis of formal and informal communications systems within the agency. Current strengths and weaknesses, and opportunities for enhanced communication might usefully be examined. This analysis should include the organizational structure and systems that support the flow of information and decision-making, as well as the systems that support individual employees and teams. An analysis of system strengths and weaknesses is important, for without this, decisions may be made based on assumptions rather than evidence (Schein, 1999). The need for better communication and team relationships was strongly identified throughout the inquiry process as discussed in Conclusion 3. It was identified as the most important factor in supporting employee effectiveness, described in Finding 4.

Research participants gave a wealth of suggestions for organizational improvement in terms of communication and the Best Lives Advisory Group has had preliminary discussions
about specific action plans. One specific suggestion that came through strongly in the study was that of the need for a centralized database for employee use. A database that could be remotely accessed so that all information is securely stored could be a boon to effective and efficient management and communication of information.

Specific suggestions and enthusiasm are important steps for positive change, however examining and understanding the structure and systems that inform the roles and relationships is necessary. As stated by Bolman and Deal (2008), “A key ingredient of a top-notch team is an appropriate blueprint of roles and relationships set in motion to attain common goals” (p. 101). Similarly, Burke (1992) identified four behaviour-oriented models to use in the examination and diagnosis of systems within an organization, as he believed that change is based on understanding what people do or not do.

Instead of solely adjusting the people to fit the system, examining and perhaps adjusting the system to fit the people (Bolman & Deal, 2008) may be a useful approach to take in strengthening and improving communication and team relationships. The importance of this recommendation lies with the idea that “You can’t separate structure from behaviour” (Weisbord, 2004), and so by not taking the time to examine a system along with behaviours, apparent solutions may be short-lived.

**Recommendation 4: Establish regular large group learning opportunities**

Establish regular group learning sessions to allow people to share experiences, discuss, learn, problem-solve, and identify education and training needs. These sessions could be topic-focused and be built into the position requirements for every employee. Ideally, sessions would involve entire teams, including those who provide direct support, coordinators and administrative
personnel, based on specific topic areas. The expectation might be that people will work together to learn from each other to provide the best support for individuals and each other, and be opportunities to identify specific mentorship and training needs.

This recommendation is in response to Finding 4, wherein it is described that employees are able to identify what they need, and they also have a lot to offer others. Establishing regular sessions to learn together and from each other would be one way to address the desire for opportunities for reflection and discussion as described in Finding 5. Group situations can prompt important personal learning through intense self-reflection and reflecting with others (Fook, 2010). Learning together in groups or teams for the purpose of problem-solving allows the possibility for greater creativity and thinking about solutions, as Senge (2006) points out, “…collectively, we can be more insightful, more intelligent than we can possibly be individually” (p. 221).

**Recommendation 5. Improve baseline and on-going training opportunities**

Establish a higher baseline of education and/or training for all employees. New hires without a formal educational or training background in working with individuals with developmental disabilities would ideally be trained before they begin their work so that they start with: an understanding of and alignment with organizational mission, vision and values; a basic understanding of person to person communication; a comprehension of the dynamics of working with teams; knowledge and ability to support life skills development with persons that they are hired to assist, and knowledge of individual differences or disabilities as they are relevant to their work. Provide training on an on-going basis to all employees to improve and address changing team relationships, specific support needs and community engagement.
In the area of supporting employee effectiveness as described under Finding 4, staff training and development was identified as a major factor. Participants felt that by having more opportunities to improve their own development and by training newly hired staff to work effectively with individuals and with teams, employees as a whole would be more effective. While the area of training and development sometimes calls for accessing resources beyond those available within the organization, many of the needs may be addressed by experienced persons within. The role of training and development in many cases could be performed through learning groups, as in Recommendation 4 above, accessing outside expertise, or through mentorship systems. Mentorship systems could be formalized, by designating time and resources that encourage employees to access assistance from colleagues within the organization, thereby strengthening engagement, leadership opportunities and relationships.

Encouraging the continuous development of an organization is built upon efforts to actively engage employees to improve their own practices, the work of their teams and to support them in their efforts. By elevating the knowledge and practices of individual employees within SACLA, the whole system in which they operate may benefit (Senge, 2006). To underestimate the importance of a knowledgeable and prepared employee group, and to not encourage constant improvement through learning, may result in continuing examples of poor team relationships and inability to effectively and purposefully support persons to live their best lives.

Limitations to the Research

Action research is intended to be responsive to the needs of an organization, resulting in recommendations for change based on its unique aspects. Thus, there was no intention that
findings, conclusions or recommendations of this inquiry would be directly applicable beyond the realm of SACLA.

The initial data collection tool, the survey, used the basic technique of soliciting information from the whole group of possible participants, all SACLA employees and contractors. The low participation rate was a matter of puzzlement and concern with both the survey and the second tool, the large group intervention. In discussing the phenomenon of “non-response,” Gobo (2004, p. 441) noted that researchers have to take into consideration the gap that exists between the initial sample and the final sample. He cited his own previously published material to describe three aspects of non-response, any or all of which may be relevant to this research project. Lack of contact with the person selected, the refusal to be interviewed, and the refusal to fill in the whole questionnaire if the questions are too sensitive (p. 442).

The low response rate for the survey (40/248) may have indicated a low level of interest and/or poor timing resulting in low availability of participants. A lack of personal connection may have also been a factor, in that the initial delivery of the survey information to most employees was through an impersonal process, the mail. Also, there may have been TLs and CSWs who were uncomfortable with the idea of group discussion or topic areas, and so did not respond to the large group intervention invitations. As well it was suggested by some large group intervention participants that co-workers wanted to participate but could not fit it into their schedules; CSWs (7), TLs (3).

It could be that lack of response to the questionnaire may have in part been due to sensitivity to some of the demographic questions such as the one asking for educational background, as one respondent said that they would prefer not to give any specifics. Perhaps the
open-ended nature of the main research questions was a deterrent, whilst perhaps the four-page length of the paper survey itself was a barrier. Gobo (2004) discussed research showing that those who choose not to take part in surveys are not just random but may represent a group that has very different views from those who participate. To uncover these potentially dissimilar views for the purposes of this inquiry would require another research step.

Despite the apparent limitation of low response rate, this study has the characteristics of internal generalizability. Maxwell (2012) claimed that internal generalizability, or generalizing within a setting, is important for qualitative research. Processes or strategies to support the internal generalizability of this study are similar to those that Stringer (2007) associated with the overall trustworthiness of research such as observation, triangulation of methods, and member checking.

Observation and recording over the five-month data collection period of this study is an important piece of the trustworthiness of the research. The element of familiarity between myself and many current employees, the basis of which is in previous employment with SACLA, may be a factor that facilitated ease of informal communication during the course of this inquiry. The two other data collection methods, survey and large group intervention along with corroboration of other internal documents provides evidence of triangulation. The participation of the Best Lives Advisory Group in reviewing findings and conclusions was a key piece in verifying that the research represented their participation and/or their experiences within the organization. Though triangulation is evident in this inquiry, limitations remain regarding the utility of the findings for other organizations.
The broader value and/or limitations of this study may also be considered through the term “transferability” as described by Lincoln and Guba, where generalizations about process may be made by the reader (Gobo, 2004, p. 451). Both Glesne (2011) and Stringer (2007) wrote about the need to make the description of the context and activities of the research very clear so that readers can decide for themselves the limitations or potential usefulness of the process to their own situations.

**Chapter Summary**

Recommendations arising from the findings and conclusions are based on current leadership concepts and practices. Measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and internal generalizability make the applicability of the findings, conclusions and recommendations appropriate and useful for the organization. The processes by which the data were collected, and the context of the research within the organization and the larger provincial system, may make other elements relevant and useful to other organizations. This study may also have transferable aspects for similar organizations due to the importance of supporting employees to do their best work in supporting independence for persons with developmental disabilities, as will be discussed in the closing chapter.
CHAPTER SIX: REFLECTIONS ON THE INQUIRY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide evidence of my critical reflection on aspects of the inquiry, and to consider how the work that was done may contribute to the field of leadership research and practice. A consideration of the process of the inquiry from an action research perspective will begin the chapter. I will examine my engagement as an insider researcher, and follow it with an analysis of the quality of engagement of the stakeholder groups both with the process and with the possible change initiatives. I will reflect on my own learning in this process. The next-steps of the project will be described and considered. Finally I will examine the project in terms of first-person, second-person and third-person potential learning and benefits.

The Action Research Process

Action research, from the perspective of the student researcher, was challenging to understand as scholars sometimes emphasized different aspects of practice or of theoretical frameworks. Glesne (2011) summed this up neatly by explaining that methodologies such as action research change with various practitioners and disciplines, and in response to other factors of the time. Stringer (2007) also acknowledged different ways of describing processes that are essentially similar; “There are, after all, many ways of cutting a cake” (p. 8).

Reason and Bradbury (2008) consider action research to refer more to an approach to research or an “orientation to inquiry” (p. 2) rather than a methodology. Stringer (2007) defines it as a “systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to [everyday] problems” (p. 1). Reason and Bradbury, and Stringer, emphasize the necessity of looking thoroughly at the underpinnings of the community or organization by engaging a wide stakeholder base. Thinking and seeking to understand the issues at hand occur through
consideration of the participants’ own thoughts and experiences in the context of the systems in place. Collaborative action results from the looking and thinking processes, only to become the basis for further cycles of looking, thinking and acting. The participatory and collaborative nature of action research is what makes it a particularly useful agent for organizational change (Stringer, 2007).

The impetus for this action research inquiry started as a result of my own early cycles of looking, thinking and acting as a worker with the sponsor organization. I wondered about what could be done to improve my own effectiveness and the effectiveness of my team. In the process of considering effectiveness, I realized the centrality of the mission statement in guiding the work of employee as individuals and collectively as the organization. I carried some of these thoughts into a small action project that had gained some momentum when I departed SACLA. This incomplete project provided much material for reflection on self and the organization with regards to the process of research and the role of leadership.

Once engaged in my leadership journey through Royal Roads University, I came to see the potential of action research as a vehicle for change within the organization. The goal of action research as stated by Reason and Bradbury (2008) is “to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing” (p. 1). For me, the key to greater effectiveness as one worker and as part of the organization, was to more thoughtfully enact the mission the mission statement of “supporting persons to live their best lives” (SACLA, n.d., Mission Statement), or in other words to support the flourishing of the persons that we assist. Thus, the goal of action research and what I saw as the goal of this research project were completely aligned.
Over the next year, the organization sponsor and I worked together to find the approach that would most appropriately suit the organization. This involved considering the findings and requirements of the on-going governmental audit process of the larger PDD system, researching current assessment and evaluation practices about quality of life for persons with developmental disabilities, and a constant awareness of the dynamics within the organization as they related to communication, evolving team relationships and working in a unionized setting. While this step certainly reflects much of what Coghlan and Brannick (2010) described as the context and purpose-building phase of the constructing step, what did not occur during this time was engagement with a broader base of stakeholders. However, “relevant others” (p. 9) from the management team were engaged in the constructing process, rather than this being done by myself alone, as the researcher.

Similarly, planning the action of the research was done mainly in collaboration with the project sponsor, and in consultation with my academic advisor. During this time the decision was made to limit the scope of the data gathering to employees of the organization, with the understanding and acknowledgement that to engage a broader stakeholder group might have been preferable but not realistic within my timeframe for the inquiry as a student. By limiting participation to those who had the greatest “effect on the problem or issue of interest” (Stringer, 2007, p. 43) we made the project manageable, but did not align with Stringer’s (2007) admonition to engage all stakeholders in “defining and exploring the problem” (p. 44).

The data gathering, or the taking action cycle (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010) was compressed due to the need to make the required steps work in a short-time line. Ideally, the action step of data gathering through the survey would have prompted a cycle of looking and
thinking as a means of informing the next data-gathering step, the large group interventions. However, Coghlan and Brannick recognized the need to be realistic about the cycles of action research, wherein creativity and spontaneity as well as other implied circumstances may adjust previous intentions for a more systematic approach (p. 11).

The step of evaluating action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010) or the thinking step (Stringer, 2007) involved an intense period of working with the data in order to recognize themes. These themes resulted in specific findings and conclusions which were then discussed with the organizational sponsor. Dialogue between my sponsor and myself, took into account not only the data gathered during the course of this inquiry, but also recent events within the organization. Thus, a current context was explored from which would start another cycle. The second cycle’s action piece, the meeting of the Best Lives Advisory Group, was conducted as part of the organizational change process, though specific data was not collected for the purposes of this inquiry.

The meeting resulted in another step of reflection and forms the basis for engagement and action on the part of employee groups in the near future. By developing and supporting processes for employee participation in the change process, the organization can realize the potential of action research in developing shared understandings of the work, and the development of the sense of community (Stringer, 2007).

Though this project strayed from some of the considerations of action research theorists as described above, it aligns in principle with five main descriptors as outlined by Reason and Bradbury (2008). This inquiry was based on the desire to act upon a concern within the organization, it opened some space for dialogue, drew on different methods of knowing and
expression as evidenced by the research tools, was oriented to the mission of the organization and the values that support it, and may continue to be an emergent process beyond the formal parameters of the project (p. 6). Upon further reflection, I believe that this project fulfills what Reason and Bradbury say is a key dimension of quality, “to be aware of one’s choices and to make those choices clear, transparent, [and] articulate,” to me as the researcher, the organization and to the wider world (p. 13).

**My Role as an Insider Researcher**

The implication of being a researcher in my own organization was not entirely clear before embarking on this study. Though I had intentionally distanced myself from my position by taking a leave of absence during the data collection and writing phases, I still found that the most pressing issue was my engagement with the topic area. My passion for this may have been both a benefit and a challenge. In reviewing Coghlan and Brannick’s (2010) discussion about role duality of being an employee and a researcher (p. 117 – 123), I felt that while my status and relationship network within the organizations was technically small, there may have been more at play in terms of organizational politics than I anticipated.

In the process of analyzing data, forming conclusions and recommendations, I found myself questioning my own assumptions about the nature of some of the relationships and communication systems in the organization. This inevitably led to wondering if I had designed the project with too large a scope, therefore allowing information to emerge to corroborate some suspicions that I did not want to address. I consulted my academic supervisor and she advised me to review the data to clearly articulate the themes that emerged. Her advice allowed me to “work more consciously and explicitly at the process of inquiry” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 122). I
was able to reserve my previously held opinions and develop findings, conclusions and recommendations that arose from the data gathered.

Importantly, I also underestimated how significantly my experiences would inform the core questions that underlie the research. For example, I saw in myself and others that there was room to grow in terms of enacting the mission statement, and I also saw that self-reflection and opportunities for discussion with colleagues were enormously helpful in my own professional development. Questions about the role of self-reflection and the concept of best life grew directly out of my own curiosity about how personal perspectives and practices influence the way that people view their work. While I was aware that these questions developed out of my own experiences, I had not, until writing this chapter, particularly considered how this project was shaped as a result.

Despite having worked with the organization, I did not know most of the participants in the large group interventions. I believe that by explaining my personal relationship to the study, I was able to connect to the participants on a personal level. My role as “internal facilitator” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 102), not being in a position of formal authority, also likely enhanced the quality of the engagement of those who participated. The specific ethical considerations required by the university to separate hierarchy levels in the large group intervention process may also have supported a significant level of trust in the process.

The Best Lives Advisory Group that convened after the findings and conclusions were developed, was largely composed of TLs and CSWs who had participated in the large group interventions though it was not limited in that way. There was a waiting list of TLs that wanted to attend, and a draw of names had to be held in order to keep the numbers to a manageable
level. Two Coordinators were able to attend out of the three asked. Participants in this Advisory Group meeting were interested in the findings of the research project and appeared to genuinely engage with each other in discussion and enhancement of ideas for organizational change in the areas of communication and teamwork. Tentative dates were suggested for the next meeting, as most participants in the group expressed the desire to meet again to further explore possibilities arising from the research and to begin the process of action planning.

**Learning About Best Life**

The most interesting area of learning for me was around the concept of what living a best life may mean to funders, society in general and at an individual level. It was not a surprise to me that when asked, survey participants and large group intervention participants most commonly identified the areas of relationships and self-determination as two of the most important areas for their own best lives. However, it was a surprise that between the groups of TLs and CSWs, distinctly different things came up as most commonly important after the areas of relationships and self-determination. Even though most TLs and CSWs provide direct support, the difference in response was quite significant. This implies that the concept of best life is highly specific to situations, even situations where the nature of the work that people do is very similar.

In reading about uses of various quality of life measures around the world it became apparent that people in general want the same sorts of things for their lives, as discussed in Chapter 2. Therefore the quality of life of groups of people can be generalized to some degree and have good use in assessing the well-being of communities or distinct groups of people in relation to the broader societies of which they are part. As well, reading about the mission of PDD branch in Alberta which emphasizes supporting the independence and social inclusion
opportunities of persons with developmental disabilities helped me to comprehend that such statements may be meant to emphasize areas that are generally valued, and are understood to have been underrepresented in the lives of persons with developmental disabilities.

However, I am wondering how much this statement has been over-generalized and applied more as a directive for each individual with developmental disabilities, rather than working with individuals to find out what they wish for their best life. This also implies that in order to support someone to live their best life it behooves me and all of us to find ways to truly listen, learn and understand what individuals want for their best life.

**Learning at the First, Second and Third Person Levels**

**First person**

I have learned that while I am keenly interested in the academic aspects of action research, I remain passionate about the potential tangible applications of such research for myself and my communities. The impetus for desiring to understand the role and practices of leadership came from a deep place of wanting to become more fully purposeful in my life. This particular project was sparked by a desire for change and improvement within myself and emerged in the context of the organization. While gaining valuable information for the organization, a major outcome of this inquiry has been the new questions that have arisen, furthering my own engagement with the topic and challenging me to move forward with promoting change beyond the scope of this project.

In describing the perspectives of prominent action researchers, Wicks, Reason and Bradbury (2008), say that life experiences ground their intellectual and philosophical perspectives. Though I have not fully reflected upon the role of research within the context of my
philosophical and intellectual self, another common thread amongst the researchers as presented by Wicks, Reason and Bradbury resonated with my own place in the context of research. This is the fundamental belief in the interconnectedness of life that underpins my own purpose and way of being in the world.

On a personally practical level, I have learned much about my style of interaction that I believe is often guided by an avoidance of a meaningful level of engagement. There were many times during the course of this inquiry that I missed opportunities to further my own understanding and the understandings of those around, and I know that I must pay attention to that aspect of myself. I believe I am at ease with what Senge (2006) would call discussion, or the back and forth interaction of words and ideas. Allowing myself to go to the point of dialogue, beyond the exchange of individual perspectives to the level of deeper meaning, (p. 221 – 232) is far more challenging.

Though the specific implementation of any recommendations I have made are out of my control, I have had confirmation of the value of the communicative processes involved in the data gathering as evidenced by comments made by some participants, indicating that the opportunity to engage with others through this inquiry has been beneficial. Thus, as an individual action researcher, I can feel that I may have made at least a small difference, as “Action research requires all participants to engage in styles and forms of communication that facilitate the development of harmonious relationships” (Stringer, 2010, p. 30).

**Second person**

The importance of supporting and developing the person-to-person aspects in the research process may become apparent when those practices are recognized as fundamental for
the organizational change process. This aspect became clear in this inquiry as some people that had participated in the large group interventions verbally expressed the desire to have the opportunity for further engagement with co-workers to carry on the conversations they had begun. The desire for opportunities for discussion was also conveyed through feedback from the large group interventions. Interestingly, very few respondents made this as a specific suggestion for organizational change.

The participatory aspects of action research that may support the development of community within an organization would be best utilized if incorporated right from the beginning of a project. While this project shows benefits of the use of group processes for information gathering and discussion, I believe that the project may have had more traction and engagement if the project plan arose from a group of persons who were directly affected by any outcomes. Weisbord (2004) maintained that “dignity and meaning come from deep engagement” (p. 288) and that the best way to find out how to make change in an organization is to get as many stakeholders “as possible in one room and ask them to work on a task together” (p. 289).

While it is easy to say that there should have been more stakeholder engagement from the very beginning, timelines were major constraints on how the project progressed. I believe that in order for the second person benefits to be maximized, the element of time has to be carefully considered. I underestimated the amount of time required to complete the initial planning and requirements to begin the data gathering, as well as the time needed to effectively engage groups of people. For many non-profit organizations, particularly those that provide 24-hour supports, available time and energy is limited, as well as budgets to support the depth of engagement that might be ideal. Enhancing existing practices that promote continued communication and
collaboration at the organizational level would help to further the benefits of the initial action research project.

**Third person**

While the findings and conclusions of this study are relevant specifically to SACLA, concepts and questions have arisen that may have relevance for other, similar organizations. Generalizability can be defined as the ability to generalize about a specific population between settings (Gobo, 2004, p. 451), or what Maxwell (2012) calls “external generalizability”; generalizing to other similar settings (p. 142).

The concept of best life for persons with developmental disabilities should be an ever-present consideration for those who are in a support role, either individually or as part of an agency. Distinct differences in the way that employees saw their own best lives based on their situations were found in this study. This finding begs further research and consideration, and may stimulate an awareness of differences in situations when we consider how we support individuals. Without actually knowing what they see as their best life our support may be based purely on assumptions.

The broader relevance of this research project is that it may lead to exploring how the idea of best life, or good life, or having a quality life, is viewed across Alberta. As a starting point, I see potential benefits to Albertans with developmental disabilities by research being done based on the following questions: Are persons with developmental disabilities being supported individually in accordance with the mission of PDD which mandates supporting people to live as independently as possible and be included in part of their community? Or, are they being supported individually to live the life that they see for themselves, regardless of what PDD states
are the priorities for their support? Are people being supported largely based on the assumptions that by working towards these two societal values, independence and inclusion, other areas that make a good life will follow?

I believe that a fundamental question that may follow from this more focused investigation into how best life is interpreted is: how can we know what individuals see as their own best life? What valuable strategies do we have as workers and organizations when: there are barriers to effective communication; or a person’s network of family and friends is not able to help bring that information forward; or, when a person has had few experiences in life to be able to envision what a best life might be? By inquiring into these more basic questions, with the backdrop of understanding the role of societal values and assumptions, usable information may arise to benefit persons with developmental disabilities to live their best lives.

Chapter Summary

This concluding chapter provided an opportunity to reflect on the process of action research and potential impacts of this research project for myself, others and the wider community. The completion of this project marks the culmination of a formal learning situation, but may also represent the gateway to further cycles of looking, thinking and acting. This project has enabled me to scratch the surface of my curiosity in the area of supporting people to live a good life, and of what I could contribute to this work on a level beyond my interests and the interests of my sponsor organization.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF PDD CHANGE INITIATIVES

The Minister’s six PDD Priority Actions and the 11 directions given to Community Boards following the administrative review have resulted in the PDD Change Initiatives Project.

The 17 activities/directions have been consolidated into nine “Change Initiatives” and are paraphrased here as follows:

1. Have PDD operate as one program / one organization, consistently across all regions
   - Identify common functions and processes to be implemented province-wide, and in cooperation with the Alberta Supports Initiative, design an organizational structure that supports those functions and processes.
2. Make PDD’s contracting process more effective and efficient
   - Continue to implement the Supports Intensity Scale and related funding approach
   - Improve the way the PDD program procures and contracts for services
3. Improve accountability and focus on continuous improvement for the PDD system
   - Implement a Performance Management Framework that includes a focus on measuring achievement of Personal Outcomes for individuals
   - Develop an Accountability framework for funded service providers
4. Develop a more modern client information computer system that allows for improved case management, payments and monitoring, and is accessible by the PDD program and contracted service providers
5. Clarify the PDD program’s mandate as it relates to the program’s Core Businesses, and share best practices across the program to demonstrate innovation and service excellence
6. Communicate consistent information about the PDD program
   - Have a common website to replace the Community Board websites
7. Redirect savings achieved by reducing administration costs, to frontline services for individuals
8. Support and enhance the use of Family Managed Services as an option for families
   - Have consistent, comprehensive information
   - Reduce administrative barriers for families
9. Improve supports for individuals with complex needs

Adapted from: Government of Alberta, Human Services, PDD Change Initiatives, 2012
Supporting People to Live Their Best Lives

Thank you for completing this survey. It is part of a project, “Supporting Persons to Live Their Best Lives.” The project is about making a difference in the way that all of us at SACLA do our work. Here is your chance to give important input! The project is designed to gather ideas, information and opinions about how we see our own “best life,” what we do well and how we can strengthen the quality of what we do. The few minutes you take today to complete this survey will assist in guiding the future of the organization, so that we can all more fully live up to the mission statement, "Southern Alberta Living Association is a leader in supporting persons to live their best lives and pursue their dreams."

In a few words, please say why you decided to do this survey.

A. Demographic information

In what age range are you?

- 18 - 24 years old
- 25 - 35 years old
- 36 - 50 years old
- over 51 years old

For how many years have you been working with SACLA?

- Less than one year
- 1 - 2 years
- 2 - 5 years
- 5 - 10 years
- 10 or more years

What category most closely fits your position with SACLA?

- Community Support Worker Relief
Community Support Worker Permanent (Part or Full-time)
Contractor (Roommate Companion)
Team Leader
Administrative Team
Coordinator or Director

Please indicate your educational background. Give specifics where applicable.

- High School or Equivalency ______________________
- Certification through accredited institution ______________________
- College diploma ______________________
- Bachelor level degree ______________________
- Masters level or higher ______________________
- Other - please explain ______________________

B. "Southern Alberta Community Living Association is a leader in supporting persons to live their best lives and pursue their dreams" - SACLA Mission Statement.

A “best life” means different things to different people. To support others in living their best lives, it may be important to identify what we want for ourselves.

What does “best life” mean to you? Please choose the five areas that are most important to you in living what you consider to be your ‘best life’. Please note any others that are most important to you that are not on the list. (Adapted from Schalock & Keith’s Quality of Life Questionnaire, 1993).

- Personal Development - the opportunity to pursue interests and education
- Self-determination - the ability to independently make choices and decisions, set personal goals and have control of what you do in daily life
- Relationships – friendships, social activities, relationships with family and friends
- Social inclusion – participate in community events; take on responsibilities in the community
☐ Rights – Equality in Canadian society and before the law

☐ Physical Well-being – generally free from injury, pain and illness

☐ Emotional Well-being – the ability to recognize and balance emotional needs with the needs of others, and handle life’s stresses

☐ Spiritual Well-being – connection to one’s deeper self and/or to a larger reality outside of one’s self

☐ Material Well-being- basic material needs are met and the opportunity exists to achieve some material ‘wants’

☐ Please describe any other areas that are important to you

**What helps you in your work?**

Please describe the three things that help you to do your job well. Your responses can include any factor in your personal or work life.

**What hinders you in your work?**

Please describe the three that hinder you the most in doing your job well. Your responses can include any factor in your personal or work life.

**C. Organizational Change**

Please describe the three most important changes that SACLA could make to help you, in your work, support persons with developmental disabilities to live their best lives.

**Thank you so much for taking the time to respond to this survey. Your ideas are appreciated and will contribute to SACLA living its mission more fully.**

Please deposit your completed survey at the drop-box at SACLA, or mail it directly to me at: [Mailing address] If you prefer, you can do this survey on-line at XXXXXXXX

If you have any questions, comments or concerns, please contact Rene directly at [E-mail address] or call [Telephone number].

**Thank you!**

*Rene Plaizier*

*Student, Royal Roads University*
APPENDIX C: LARGE GROUP INTERVENTION QUESTIONS

A. What does “best life” mean to you for your own life?
B. Tell me about a time when you or a co-worker supported an individual in a way that promoted their independence and helped them to live their best life in that moment. (please do not refer to any individuals or co-workers by name).
C. What things (circumstances, situations, policies, factors) help you to support individuals to live their best lives? What things hinder you in your attempts to support individuals to live their best lives?
D. What changes can SACLA make to help all employees to support individuals to live their best lives?
APPENDIX D: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE & CONSENT - SURVEY

My name is Rene Plaizier, and this research project is part of the requirement for a Master’s Degree in Leadership at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by telephoning Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Program Head, MA Leadership at [telephone number].

The title of my project is “Supporting People to Live Their Best Lives.” The objective of this research project is to identify ways in which SACLA can improve its ability to support persons with developmental disabilities to live their best lives. The main research question is: How can Southern Alberta Community Living Association help all employees to enact the mission to support persons with developmental disabilities to “live their best lives and pursue their dreams?”

In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master’s Degree in Leadership, I will also be sharing my research findings with Southern Alberta Community Living Association. The results of this project may be shared with other agencies whose objective it is to support persons with development disabilities, Alberta Council of Disability Services, Alberta Human Services. Results may also be published as a journal article. A copy of the final report may be published and archived in the RRU Library as well as the Library and Archives of Canada. Copies of the research results will be available to SACLA employees in a manner to be specified at that time. Please feel free to contact me directly if you have questions regarding the project process and/or project outcomes.

I invite you to participate in an anonymous survey. This can be completed on-line at: http://app.fluidsurveys.com/surveys/rene-T/supporting-people-to-live-their-best-lives/ Or you can complete the enclosed paper copy and drop it off at the SACLA office. The survey will be open from now until September 17.

Raw data will be kept in a locked cabinet for the duration of the project and destroyed after the project is complete. Electronic data will be kept in encrypted files and be saved for five years following completion of the project. As the data from the survey cannot be attributed to any one person, it will not be possible to withdraw the information of any one individual respondent should the participant change their mind about participating. By completing the survey, you are giving free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Thank you for your time and energy. The ideas and information you offer may contribute to positive organizational changes for Southern Alberta Community Living Association.

Sincerely,

Rene M. Plaizier
[E-mail address] [Telephone number]
APPENDIX E: CSW INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE & CONSENT - GROUP INTERVIEW

Date

Dear Fellow Employee:

I would like to invite you to be part of the second component of the research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for a Master’s Degree in Leadership, at Royal Roads University. My name is Rene Plaizier and my credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Program Head, MA Leadership at [telephone number].

I am extending an invitation to you to participate in a group interview activity. There will be two opportunities to participate. One will be held on Monday, September 10 from 9 – 11. The other will be held on Wednesday, September 12, from 6p – 8p. Both activities will be held at ______________________. Please choose the time best suited to your schedule and email or call me directly before September 7 to confirm your participation, using the information at the bottom of the letter. By emailing or calling me to participate, you are confirming that you have read and understood the contents of this letter and consent to have your information used as outlined.

The objective of my research project is to identify ways in which SACLA can improve its ability to support persons with developmental disabilities to live their best lives. The main research question is: How can Southern Alberta Community Living Association help all employees to enact the mission to support persons with developmental disabilities to “live their best lives and pursue their dreams?”

In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master’s Degree in Leadership, I will also be sharing my research findings with Southern Alberta Community Living Association. The results of this project may be shared with other agencies whose objective it is to support persons with development disabilities, Alberta Council of Disability Services, Alberta Human Services. Results may also be published as a journal article. A copy of the final report may be published and archived in the RRU Library as well as the Library and Archives of Canada. Copies of the research results will be available to SACLA.
employees in a manner to be specified at that time. Please feel free to contact me directly if you have questions regarding the project process and/or project outcomes.

Data from the group interview will be electronically recorded and, where appropriate, summarized, in anonymous format, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless your specific agreement has been obtained beforehand. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential. Raw data will be kept in a locked cabinet for the duration of the project and destroyed after the project is complete. Electronic data will be kept in encrypted files and be saved for five years following completion of the project. As the data from the group interview activity cannot be attributed to any individual, it will not be possible to withdraw information should the respondent change his or her mind about participating. Please feel free to contact me directly if you have questions regarding the project process and/or project outcomes.

Though I am a SACLA employee I am currently on leave to focus on this project. My husband, Ron Wolfe, is a full-time employee of SACLA as a Team Leader. For this group interview activity, only those CSWs with whom my husband does not work will be invited to participate. It is necessary to limit participation in this way in order to address any real or perceived conflict of interest. The activity will take place away from the SACLA office to limit any real or perceived influence from the management of the organization.

You are not compelled to participate in this research project. Your participation in this project will have no effect either positively or negatively on your current employment or possibilities for future advancement. **If you participate, your time will be compensated by SACLA** at your regular wage, either as part of a regular shift or in addition to any scheduled shifts. As well, your name will go into a draw for a $50.00 gift certificate.

I look forward to seeing you there!

Sincerely,

Rene M. Plaizier

[E-mail address]  [Telephone number]
APPENDIX F: TL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE & CONSENT - GROUP INTERVIEW

Date

Dear SACLA Team Leader,

It has been a long time in coming, but finally I am able to invite you to be part of the second component of the research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for a Master’s Degree in Leadership, at Royal Roads University. My name is Rene Plaizier and my credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Program Head, MA Leadership at [telephone number]

I am extending an invitation to you to participate in the group interview portion of the project. This group activity is scheduled to take place on September 12, 2012, from 12p – 2p, at __________________________. Please confirm your participation before September 7 by responding directly to me using the information at the bottom of the letter. By emailing or calling me to participate, you are confirming that you have read and understood the contents of this letter and consent to have your information used as outlined.

The objective of my research project is to identify ways in which SACLA can improve its ability to support persons with developmental disabilities to live their best lives. The main research question is: How can Southern Alberta Community Living Association help all employees to enact the mission to support persons with developmental disabilities to “live their best lives and pursue their dreams?”

In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master’s Degree in Leadership, I will also be sharing my research findings with Southern Alberta Community Living Association. The results of this project may be shared with other agencies whose objective it is to support persons with development disabilities, Alberta Council of Disability Services, Alberta Ministry Human Services. Results may also be published as a journal article. A copy of the final report may be published and archived in the RRU Library as well as the Library and Archives of Canada. Copies of the research results will be available to SACLA employees in a manner to be specified at that time. Please feel free to contact me directly if you have questions regarding the project process and/or project outcomes.
Data from the group interview will be electronically recorded and, where appropriate, summarized, in anonymous format, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless your specific agreement has been obtained beforehand. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential. Raw data will be kept in a locked cabinet for the duration of the project and destroyed after the project is complete. Electronic data will be kept in encrypted files and be saved for five years following completion of the project. As the data from the group interview activity cannot be attributed to any individual, it will not be possible to withdraw the information of anyone should the respondent change his or her mind about participating. Please feel free to contact me directly if you have questions regarding the project process and/or project outcomes.

Though I am an employee of SACLA, I am currently on a leave of absence to focus on this project. My husband, Ron Wolfe, is a full-time employee of SACLA as a Team Leader. He will not be a participant in the activity. It is necessary to limit participation in this way in order to address any real or perceived conflict of interest. The activity will take place away from the SACLA office to limit any real or perceived influence from the management of the organization.

You are not compelled to participate in this research project. Your participation in this project will have no effect either positively or negatively on your current employment or possibilities for future advancement. **If you participate, your time will be compensated by SACLA** at your regular wage, either as part of a regular shift or in addition to any scheduled shifts. As well, your name will go into a draw for a $50.00 gift certificate

I look forward to seeing you there!

Sincerely,

Rene M. Plaizier

[E-mail address]  [Telephone number]