

Educational Leadership Development
in the Greater Victoria School District Using
Generative Dialogue

Report on Wave I



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Executive Summary

Background

- This report documents the recorded experiences of principals and vice principals in the Greater Victoria School District, who voluntarily participated in the study of the first year of a new mandated approach to their professional development or “professional growth,” generative dialogue.
- Generative dialogue is an approach to facilitating the professional growth of a specific group of leaders – school principals and vice principals – through a conversational approach which encourages and enables them to identify and work towards their own professional goals.
- Generative dialogue was developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the early 2000s (Sharmer, n.d.), building on decades of previous work on dialogue (Gunnlaugson, 2006). Although a substantial theoretical foundation exists, literature to support the application of generative dialogue to educational leadership growth is limited (Adams, 2016).
- The current study explores the application of generative dialogue within the Greater Victoria School District, led by Dr David Townsend and Dr Pamela Adams of the University of Lethbridge. The research team was contracted by the Greater Victoria School District to conduct this research as an independent group, through the Centre for Health Leadership & Research at Royal Roads University. The project was reviewed and has clearance from the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board. The Greater Victoria School District has no access to the data reported.

Methodology & Findings

- All principals and vice principals from the 47 schools in the District engaged in generative dialogue as a professional growth process, and all were invited to participate anonymously in the study. A total of 37 sets of data were received, which included some submissions detailing subsequent interviews with the same participant. As the data were submitted anonymously, it was not possible to report the precise number of individuals who participated, but it is likely the number was 20-30.

- Notes were transcribed and analyzed using NVIVO 11 using grounded theory. In addition, consultation meetings informed interpretation and analysis of the findings. A Generative Dialogue Summit was held in Victoria in April 2018, during which the interim results were presented, and a draft report distributed to participants.
- The data indicated that principals and vice principals discussed the centrality of relationships between administration, staff, students, and parents in their professional goals.
- There were two types of challenges to relationship building that emerged from the data. The first type of challenge to relationships concerned the complex aspects of relationships, including managing stress and conflict, and in particular, addressing mental health issues within the school community. The second type of challenge was related to the practicalities of leadership, reflecting the time constraints for principals and vice principals to spend on relationships, and lack of sufficient resources to follow through on their goals for the school.
- Supports to building and maintaining relationships included developing a positive school culture, which conversely, was undermined when the culture lacked warmth; professional development, which was seen as a need; and the development of trust, which the generative dialogue approach may help to develop.

Discussion

- Few statements were received concerning the generative dialogue process itself making it difficult to evaluate in terms of participant satisfaction, and insufficient data were received to reach conclusions regarding the appropriateness of the generative dialogue approach in addressing the professional growth of principals and vice principals in the District.
- Comments about generative dialogue that were recorded were generally positive, and views expressed in consultation meetings were also positive. However, there appeared to be a lack of understanding of the process and purpose of generative dialogue.
- An analysis of generative dialogue in relation to other approaches to professional growth (which directly address the issues faced by principals and vice principals) showed that, while helpful for the self-identification of goals, generative dialogue did not address the full scope of principals and vice principals' professional development needs.

Recommendations

Five recommendations are made to the District, to improve the data collection for Wave II.

- Recommendation 1: Improve knowledge translation of generative dialogue.
- Recommendation 2: Provide more guidance for note-takers to improve the quality of data collection.
- Recommendation 3: Explore the full scope of professional development needs of new principals and vice principals.
- Recommendation 4: Develop and provide training for principals and vice principals of mental health literacy.
- Recommendation 5: Develop and provide training for principals and vice-principals on stress management.

The Research Team



Elizabeth Hartney, Ph.D., R.Psych. is a Registered Psychologist, Professor of Health Leadership, and Director of the Centre for Health Leadership and Research at Royal Roads University. She holds a MA in Education in addition to her qualifications in Psychology. Elizabeth has over twenty years of leadership experience, and conducts research and training into building Indigenous and non-Indigenous partnerships. She volunteers for Autism Community Training, and has written several publications for teachers. Elizabeth is leading the project, and can be contacted at Elizabeth.Hartney@royalroads.ca.



Keith Borkowsky is a student in the MA Leadership program at Royal Roads University. He is a communications and public relations strategist with experience in provincial and municipal governments, political organizations and the private sector, including the Manitoba Legislative Assembly, managing political campaigns and providing strategic advice. Keith has over 15 years' experience as a journalist. Keith has a lead role on the project, primarily in the transcription and analysis of data.



Jo Axe, Ph.D. is Director of the School of Education & Technology at Royal Roads University. She has conducted research on learning community development, student engagement and support, and the support and education of foster parents. She has served on the Aboriginal Awareness as well as other committees, and volunteers with the Foster Parent Support Services Society. She has a consultant role on the project supporting the analysis of data and production of reports.



Doug Hamilton, Ph.D. is head of the MA in Educational Leadership and Management-International program and former Chair of Faculty Development at Royal Roads University. He has conducted research on the scholarship of teaching and learning, school improvement and transformative change processes. He has a consultant role supporting the analysis of data and production of reports.

Introduction

What is Generative Dialogue?

Generative dialogue is a type of conversation which is reached as conversational partners let go of taking or defending a position, and instead attend to the flow of conversation, which, with reflection on underlying causes, rules, and assumptions, leads to new ways of thinking about problems and their solutions (Isaacs, 1999). As figure 1 illustrates, this is different from discussion, which arises from defending positions and viewpoints.

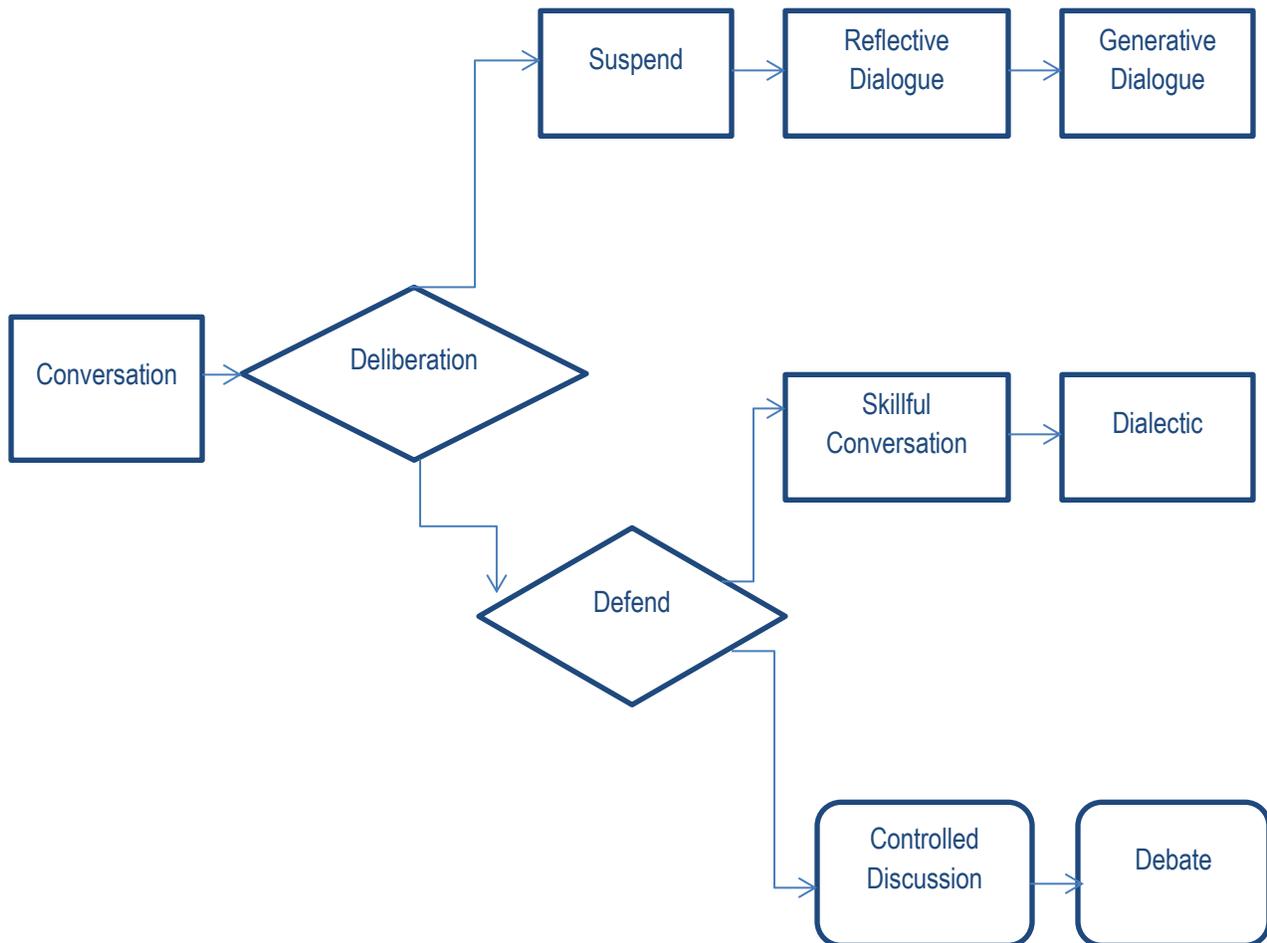


Figure 1: How generative dialogue emerges from conversation (adapted from Isaacs, 1999)

Generative Dialogue in the Greater Victoria School District

Generative dialogue is an approach to facilitating the professional growth of a specific group of leaders – school principals and vice principals. In the generative dialogue process, specifically-trained consultants with experience of school administration visited schools across the district and interviewed the current principals and/or vice principals. The intent was to provide a non-threatening, anonymous, and reasonably independent means of enabling school leaders to share and reflect on key issues within their current practice. This is achieved through a conversational approach, which encourages and enables school leaders to identify and work towards their own professional goals.

Generative dialogue provides a structure in which to do this within the conversation, and a process for recording ideas, which allows school leaders to keep ownership of their ideas and how they plan to put them into practice. The generative dialogue structure used in the Greater Victoria School District loosely consists of the following elements:

- The principal or vice principal is invited to identify their own professional growth goals for the following year;
- They are encouraged to link the goal with school improvement;
- They are supported to identify strategies to achieve their goal;
- They are asked to identify what resources they will require to achieving their goal;
- They are asked what evidence will help them to know that they have achieved their goal.

Follow up generative dialogue sessions will revisit the goal, and progress that has been made towards achieving it.

Generative dialogue was introduced to the Greater Victoria School District by the Superintendent of Schools, Piet Langstraat. Piet had successfully implemented the approach in the Calgary School District, and believed it would also be effective in Victoria. In 2016, engagement with generative dialogue (or another professional growth process) was mandated for all principals and vice principals in the District.

The facilitation of the generative dialogue approach in Victoria was led by Dr David Townsend and Dr Pamela Adams, of the University of Lethbridge. The process of implementing the approach and engaging with researchers was led by James Hansen, District Principal of Leadership and Learning. The research team (Dr Elizabeth Hartney, Keith Borkowsky, Dr Jo Axe, and Dr Doug Hamilton) was contracted by the Greater Victoria School District to conduct this research as an independent project through the Centre for Health Leadership & Research at Royal Roads University. The project was reviewed and has clearance from the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board. The Greater Victoria School District has no access to the data reported.

Research Support for Generative Dialogue

Generative dialogue was developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the early 2000s (Sharmer, n.d.), building on decades of previous work on dialogue (Isaacs, 1999; Gunnlaugson, 2006). Although a substantial theoretical foundation exists, literature to support the application of generative dialogue to educational leadership growth is limited (Adams, 2016). The current study explores the application of generative dialogue within the Greater Victoria School District, led by Dr David Townsend and Dr Pamela Adams of the University of Lethbridge.

The generative dialogue approach enables school leaders to share their perspectives, experiences, and reflections in a collegial and supportive environment with their peers. Generative dialogue is a form of peer-supported, in-situ, professional learning where school leaders can actively reflect on their practice with the assistance of other colleagues and develop meaningful goals for continued growth. Generative dialogue has similarities to several other recent approaches to school leadership growth, which have a more substantive evidence base in their application to educational leadership. These include coaching and mentoring (Salter & Gannon, 2015), instructional rounds (Allen, Roegman, & Hatch, 2015), collaborative inquiry (Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2007; Adams & Townsend, 2014), and walk-throughs (Skretta, 2007).

Emerging research has indicated generative dialogue has potential as a promising approach to school administrator development (Adams, 2016), but there is no current established evidence base for the approach, and in particular, no literature produced by impartial researchers. In addition, due to the lack of BC specific data, it is unclear whether this approach is the “right fit” for BC schools. This research project was implemented to put in place a mechanism to determine the level of effectiveness of generative dialogue to addressing the concerns of principals and vice-principals; this can only be ascertained by analysing data gathered during and after the initiation of the generative process in the Greater Victoria School District. Effectiveness includes both the satisfaction of participants with the generative dialogue process, and indications of the approach leading to school improvement.

Organizational Context

The Greater Victoria School District is located in the capital city of British Columbia, and serves students from Victoria, Esquimalt, View Royal, Oak Bay, parts of Saanich and the Highlands, the City of Victoria, and the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations. Schools draw from urban, semi-urban and suburban areas. Students come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, with 21 schools qualifying for CommunityLINK (Learning Includes Nutrition and Knowledge) funding. 17.43% of the families living in the District are considered low income (Greater Victoria School District, 2018).

The District provides publically funded education for approximately 20,000 students in 27 elementary schools (Kindergarten to Grade Five), 10 middle schools (grades six to eight), and seven secondary schools (grades nine to 12). More than 1,000 international students attend schools in the District, and each year, over 650 adult students register in the Continuing Education Program. The District also offers a variety of Programs of Choice and three Elementary Schools of Choice. In total, there are 47 schools in the District (Greater Victoria School District, 2018)..

The District, like other public school districts in British Columbia, has faced numerous challenges over the past five years, which have impacted school principals and vice principals. In 2014, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation was involved in an acrimonious dispute with the provincial government, involving a lengthy strike, which was eventually resolved in court. Although ultimately successful, this experience was deeply stressful to the entire education system, including principals and vice principals.

In addition, BC principals and vice principals are leading unparalleled change within the K-12 education system. Many of these changes are positive, including a redesigned curriculum, increased financial support for school upgrades, the introduction of teaching coding and the trades in the classroom, and other innovations. Furthermore, there is an imperative to provide better supports for children with special needs, refugees, and Indigenous students. An influx of funding, along with an aging workforce has led to considerable recruitment of new teachers, support staff, and vice principals and principals. Yet even positive change is stressful, and principals and vice principals are faced with integrating support of the whole school community in implementing these significant adjustments, into an already hefty workload.

Many of the contextual aspects of Principals' and Vice Principals' functions are reflected in the Greater Victoria School District's vision, mission, and strategic plan. As the Generative dialogue process progresses, it is intended that it will become more aligned with the strategic plan.

Greater Victoria School District Mission, Vision, Values, and Strategic Direction

The following details of the Greater Victoria School District mission, vision, values, and strategic direction are reprinted with permission from the District website (Greater Victoria School District, 2016).

Mission

We nurture each student's learning and well-being in a safe, responsive, and inclusive learning community.

Vision

Each student within our world-class learning community has the opportunity to fulfil their potential and pursue their aspirations.

Values

Engagement - Students are actively engaged in their education and connected to our learning community.

Equity - We give each student the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Innovation/Positive Change - We are innovative. We constantly seek ways to make positive change.

Integrity - We are ethical and fair.

Openness and Transparency - We are open about the decisions we make and how we make them.

Partnerships - We create open and respectful partnerships with each member of our learning community.

Respect - We respect ourselves, others, and our environment.

Social Responsibility and Justice - It is our shared responsibility to work with and inspire students to create a better world.

Strategic Priorities

The District has identified five key strategic priorities, which were being given special focus at the time the generative dialogue interviews were conducted. Thus, these priorities may be reflected in the professional goals of principals and vice principals.

Strategic Issue #1: Learner Success

The District's top priority is learner success. The District is committed to address each learner's needs, and to create physical and emotional environments that support their learners and their staff.

The District's strategic goal is to create a long term plan to enhance learner success. Their strategic objectives to achieve this goal are to increase student literacy; to increase student numeracy; to provide clear opportunities for students to identify life pathways; to support the mental health needs and well-being of students; to continue to develop appropriate and ethical use of technology; and to increase student engagement learner success.

Strategic Issue #2: Aboriginal Learners

The District's second strategic goal is to address the unique needs and build on the strengths of Aboriginal learners. The District is committed to closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners, and to addressing the unique needs and strengths of Aboriginal learners with sensitivity and vigour. Their strategic objectives to meeting this goal are to engage effectively with Aboriginal communities in the District; to improve the success of Aboriginal learners; and to support the implementation of the Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement.

The Board of Education is firmly committed to meeting the four goals of the Enhancement Agreement. These are:

1. To provide a sense of place, caring, safety, and belonging for Aboriginal students in the Greater Victoria School District.
2. To honour, nurture and support relationships between the Greater Victoria School District, local First Nations, Aboriginal Nations families and the community.
3. To continue raising awareness and understanding of Aboriginal history, traditions and culture for all staff and students in the Greater Victoria School District.
4. To increase success of all Aboriginal students.

The District recognizes that it is a shared responsibility to continue to have respectful dialogue and build positive working relationships with their Aboriginal partners, and to honour the cultural differences and diverse needs of Aboriginal learners.

Strategic Issue #3: Vulnerable Learners

The District's third strategic goal is to provide greater support for vulnerable students with diverse needs. Their strategic objectives to meet this goal are to develop a district plan for vulnerable learners; to provide support and educational opportunities to teachers and staff who work with vulnerable learners; and to continue to develop respect for learning differences.

Many community members, trustees, and senior staff, have expressed concern to the District about the shrinking levels of support for vulnerable learners, particularly those with learning and mental health challenges. As a result of budget reductions and the requirement to fund new provincial initiatives from existing resources, the District must continually find new and creative ways to meet the needs of their learners. Income disparities across the District, lack of resources to implement Individual Education Plans, and other constraints, place increasing numbers of children in a vulnerable position. This affects not only their ability to learn, but also the quality of learning for everyone. These challenges also place additional pressure on teachers.

Strategic Issue #4: Community Engagement

The District's fourth strategic goal is to actively engage with their communities. Their strategic objectives to meet this goal are to develop a District Communications and Engagement Plan; to create more effective ways to bring student voices and parent perspectives to schools and to the Board; and to create more effective ways to bring staff voices and perspectives to the Board.

The District has strong relationships with many partners including six municipalities, First Nations, and other internal and external communities, including students, families, and staff. The District strives to broaden and deepen relationships and to develop new partnerships. Senior staff and Board engagement with the internal community is also recognized as critical to learner success. The District commits to ensure stronger ties between students, communities, teachers, and staff so all parties feel valued and play a significant role in realizing their dream of being "one learning community."

Strategic Issue #5: Exemplary Governance

The District's final strategic goal is to strengthen District governance practices. Exemplary governance by the Board is considered to be essential to the District's success. The District's strategic objectives to meet this goal are to create District long-term plans including: a District Facilities Plan; a District Information Technology Plan; a District International Education Plan; and a District Environmental Plan; to increase the District's capacity for evidence-based decision-making by making better use of data; and to develop a plan to assess the effectiveness of the Board and the Superintendent.

Aims & Objectives

Aims

This research project aims to develop an understanding of principals' and vice principals' perspectives on generative dialogue. It will reveal some of the main concerns that principals and vice-principals wish to address in their workplaces, when given the space to identify their own goals for professional growth, through the generative dialogue process.

The project aims to clarify whether the generative dialogue approach is the right fit for supporting the professional development of principals and vice principals within the Greater Victoria School District, over the long term. This will be accomplished by analysis of the data documented during the first wave of generative dialogue conversations, which were voluntarily and anonymously submitted to the external research team. A second wave will be analyzed in 2018-2019. Perspectives shared by participants in consultative meetings will also be integrated into the analysis. In recognition that generative dialogue is an approach which was developed and has been implemented in several other jurisdictions, this project aims to evaluate whether it is appropriate for the BC culture. Finally, by reviewing data at different points in time, the project aims to discover whether generative dialogue is effective in supporting school improvement in the Greater Victoria School District.

Objectives

- Production of relevant, timely, objective data on the generative dialogue process, and its appropriateness for continuation in the Greater Victoria School District after 2018.
- Longitudinal data on effectiveness of generative dialogue on school improvement (available in wave II).
- In-depth data on the satisfaction of principals and vice principals with the generative dialogue approach to facilitating their professional growth.
- Comparison and contrast analysis of generative dialogue in the context of other evidence-based approaches in the field.

Research Question

How does the generative dialogue process with school principals and vice principals facilitate school improvement?

Methodology

The methodology used for this project is grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The grounded theory approach involves developing a model to increase understanding of the topic of research, which is based primarily in the expressed views of the research participants, rather than the presuppositions of the researchers. For this reason, the data are analyzed prior to reviewing the literature, and exploring the organizational context.

Ethical Issues

This project has been reviewed and received clearance from the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board (Appendix E).

Participants

All school principals and vice principals in the Greater Victoria School District were mandated to engage in a generative dialogue process (or an alternative professional growth process) to facilitate professional development. This decision was made at the District level to engage in this process, prior to, and independently of the research. In addition, district principals participated in the research process.

All principals and vice principals working in the Greater Victoria School District, and District principals who engaged in the generative dialogue process were invited to participate in the research project, verbally at a principals' and vice principals' retreat focused on generative dialogue, held by the British Columbia principals' and vice-principals' Association in February 2017, which was attended by the Principal Investigator, and later, via an information letter (see appendix A), which was provided to them during their generative dialogue interview.

Within the 47 schools in the District, there are 97 in-school principals and vice principals, as well as 12 principals and vice principals in other roles, such as District Principal. At the time the generative dialogue process began in Greater Victoria schools, there was a total of 108 principals and vice principals in position. There have been some small fluctuations since then, for example, if a vice principal is promoted or leaves part way through the year, they are not replaced, occasionally resulting in a temporary reduction in the overall number of in-school principals and vice principals. Also, three of the schools are housed in the same building and have the same principal and vice-principals.

From this overall population, a self-selected sample of 37 responses was received. A response rate could not be calculated, as some individual participants engaged in more than one generative dialogue interview, and sent in more than one set of notes, although the overall number of participants is estimated to be between 20 and 30. Overall, the response rate was low, and the majority of potential participants chose not to submit their notes to the research team during Wave I.

Data Collection and Analysis

The generative dialogue interview process was facilitated by a team of consultants engaged by the School District, who were trained in the generative dialogue approach. One-on-one, confidential interviews were conducted with individual principals and vice principals by teams of two to three consultants. The teams are comprised of retired school principals and district principals, as well as current district principals (in a peer, non-supervisory relationship with participants) and, in a few instances, included the Superintendent of schools. As the process unfolded, school principal participants were recruited and trained to join the generative dialogue team, with the intention that it would eventually become a peer-led process.

None of the research team members were directly involved in conducting the generative dialogue interviews. However, Dr Elizabeth Hartney, the Principal Investigator, attended several generative dialogue training sessions, and a two-day Generative Dialogue Retreat, alongside the principals and vice principals in the Greater Victoria School District, as well as a consultation meeting after the first wave of interviews had been completed. These meetings informed the current report, and the analysis and interpretation of the data.

During the generative dialogue interviews, one consultant took the role of leader, and another member of the team took detailed hand-written notes. The note-taking followed a protocol included in the training, which consisted of identifying the Principal's or Vice Principal's personally identified professional development goals for the following year, to identify how this linked with school improvement, identifying their strategies, and resources required for achieving the goal, and evidence that they had achieved the goal. Additional guidelines were provided by the research team for the generative dialogue leader (Appendix C) and the note-taker (Appendix D), to ensure rigour within the process.

The principals and vice principals generated all of the content in the session; the role of the generative dialogue interviewers, including the Superintendent (when present) was to ask questions to facilitate the participant to generate their own goals and strategies. At the end of the session, participants were asked about their views on the experience, and how it compares to previous professional development they have received as Principals or Vice Principals. The Superintendent was not present during these questions. This is outlined in the interview guidelines (Appendix C).

The notes taken during each interview were left with the participants, along with an information letter (Appendix A), and a stamped envelope marked confidential and addressed to Dr Elizabeth Hartney, the Principal Investigator at Royal Roads University, with a return address of James Hansen, District Principal, Greater Victoria School District Head Office. If principals and vice principals chose to participate in the project, they photocopied their notes, and send the copy to the research team via a stamped envelope provided. Sending in their notes constituted consent. No identifiers, including the names of individuals involved in, or referred to in the interview, or school names, were included in the notes.

All data were transcribed verbatim, and analysed using NVIVO Version 11 software. Any identifiers inadvertently included in the notes were blacked out in the raw data and redacted during the transcription process. The data were then coded and analyzed in NVIVO 11 software, using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach was chosen because it minimizes the preconceptions of the researcher, and instead focuses on developing a conceptual model emerging from the main concerns of the participants.

Results

The first wave of analysis resulted in the key themes of *The Centrality of Relationships*; *Challenges to Relationships*; and *Supports to Relationships*. These key themes and sub-themes are presented as a grounded theory model, in figure 2, and described in more detail below.

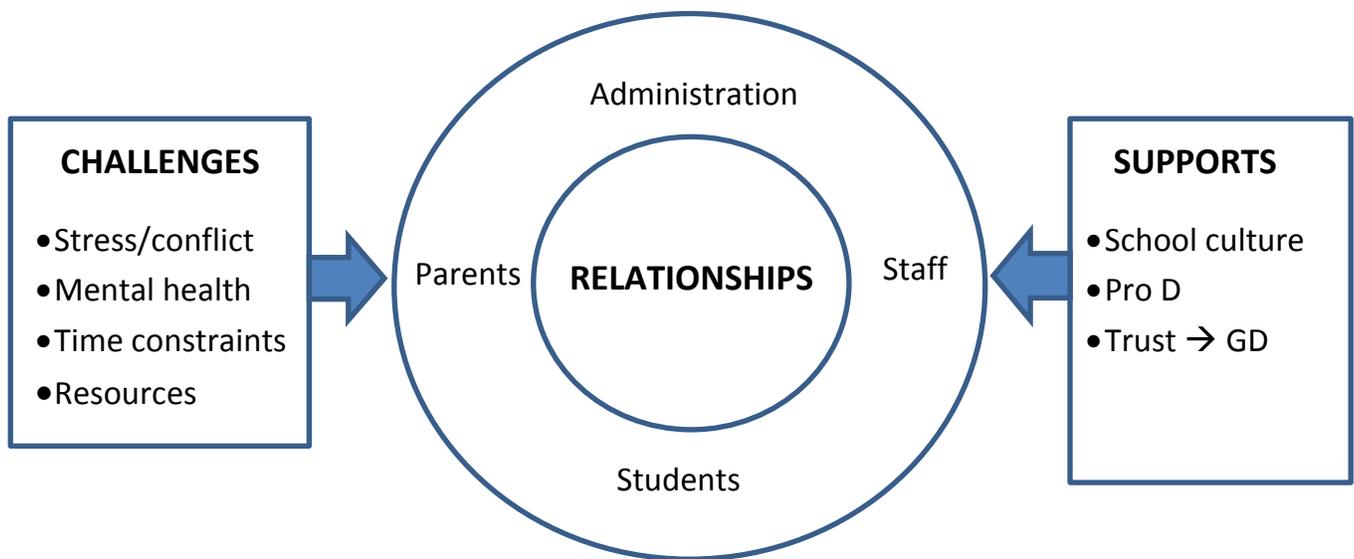


Figure 2: Grounded theory model showing the centrality of relationships for principals' and vice principals' professional growth

The Centrality of Relationships

Relationships were the focus of many generative dialogue interviews. Sub-themes within the overall theme of relationships were: relationships between *administration*, *staff*, *students*, and *parents*. The building, fostering, and maintaining of these relationships was a paramount concern to participants. They particularly felt that the management of expectations was important, in the development and maintenance of relationships between administration, staff, students, and parents. The development and maintenance of these relationships was impacted by *Challenges to Relationships* and *Supports to Relationships*.

Challenges to Relationships

There were two types of challenges to relationship building that emerged from the interviews.

The first type of challenge to relationships concerned the complex aspects of relationships. This included *managing stress*; as one participant, whose priorities included eating and sleeping, described it as being in “survival mode. Work-life balance and working a lot and not getting anywhere” (T022).

A key source of stress was managing conflict with others, such as having difficult, but necessary conversations with colleagues or staff. For example:

[There are] varying levels of skill in our staff [and the] pre-assumptions staff have about behavior. [Some] teachers [are] making blaming statements. [Even with] support staff with [an understanding of the] nuance of things assessing the moment, being flexible, [using appropriate] communication/body language. [The] personality of some gets in the way of a meaningful relationship with students/parents... quit trying to fix people around you. Look at your own self. What you can change. [This was a] tough conversation with [a] teacher, [we had] a meeting of parents. [The] teacher heard it, but [was] not taking it in. [It] was not a conversation, [because the teacher] felt she was in trouble with [the] principal. (T025)

A key stressor that emerged from the data was addressing *mental health* issues within the school community, which was challenging for principals and vice principals who did not have training in mental health literacy. A lack of training in mental health makes it difficult for principals and vice principals to determine the mental health support needs of staff and students, in supporting a healthy workplace with adequately supported students. As one participant put it, “[You] can’t get to the learning until you stabilize mental health” (T027).

A range of issues related to student mental health were identified, including anxiety requiring support. In addition, connecting vulnerable learners with supports, and the need for trauma-informed approaches, and creating safety for students at school were identified. Although small in number, some specific challenging social situations for participants which occurred in schools included interactions with students, social services, and police, as well as discipline issues.

The second type of challenge was related to the practicalities of leadership, reflecting the time constraints for principals and vice principals to spend on relationships. This is illustrated in the following quotation:

[The] reduction in admin time for next year will be very difficult. [There is] not enough time. [This] makes it harder to foster change, e.g.: less time to team teach, harder to come through for staff. I want them to be able to count on me. I need to keep the Grade 9 piece going. [There is] more slipping back to old practice where I have less time to support, fewer conversations with teachers. Even keeping track of support just became

another task to do. [There is] less time to discuss with [my] partner administrator. (T001)

Several participants felt limited by the *time constraints* of managing the duties and responsibilities they already have while requiring time to develop relationships. There was recognition of the need to take a step back to see the overall picture, but many found this challenging, due to time constraints. While recognizing a need to focus on short term issues, because of immediate priorities, the question was raised of how the focus could be placed on longer-term priorities, which may improve short-term issues.

Similarly, the challenge of whether *resources* were adequate to meet the needs of schools to support principals and vice principals in achieving their goals towards school improvement. For example, they may hope to address technology use, but without the technology and teachers to do so, meeting this goal is impossible.

Supports to Relationships

The *school culture* mattered to principals and vice principals. If there was a friendly environment, change management practices were more likely be supported. However, when the culture was not as friendly, and relationships were cooler, those who might help administrators to champion change were less likely to engage. As one participant described:

School reflects my values. Parents [and] staff [are] on board. If you build a good culture, a culture maintains itself. [A] sustainable culture – [that is] not just about me... [the] challenge at this school [is] maintaining the momentum, so it is not reliant on an individual or certain individuals. (T021)

The relationship between principals and vice principals and the School District leadership was also an area identified as crucial to developing a positive culture. One participant described:

A closed group of people - keeping head down, eyes on shoes. Not a welcoming group of principals and vice principals as colleagues in supportive ways ... Schools react as “the District” is telling us what to do - I want to move more to our schools claim as “us.” We are the district... How do we provide a way to have common values? ...They have a better relationship with their school than district support. Us [means] our school, our silo. Them [means an] overarching, controlling organization... [there is] a pattern of disconnection... “Here is the direction of the District” – principals and vice principals don’t have ownership over [the] direction. More educational assistants provide other options to the teachers [suggesting] “Have you looked at collaborative teacher models, self-regulation?” Educating the principal to make it work... We are part of a team. The District. Schools are not an isolated building. (T008)

The process of introducing generative dialogue may be important to the District’s vision to build relationships across the silos of schools and the District.

Another aspect of culture that was perceived as important in supporting relationships

was the desire to make the school stand out, and to recognize the importance of aesthetics in school environment, to convey the message of caring. This included goals like painting the library, and buying new furniture. This is illustrated in the following quotation:

This school is vibrant, attractive, cutting edge. “That’s one neat school.” [We have the] opportunity to do some neat things and interesting things with kids. Kids are ready to learn. Parents want tradition. With trust they could be more open to new ways, i.e.: tech, maximizing. [We have a] new, neat aesthetically pleasing school. Parents need to see that are receiving a good education. [The] school has been through a lot of change. Last year was a tough transition. (T0003)

The discussions of culture, ranging from styles of communication to the importance of appearances, demonstrates the high level of awareness that principals and vice principals have about the importance of school culture in engaging the internal and external community.

Professional Development

There was a need for more professional development. Some participants who had moved into administration and were no longer in the classroom felt professional development had become more challenging. Those in new principal/vice principal roles wanted further professional development as they transition into new roles. Some did not feel they were adequately prepared for the transition to their new role, as the following quotation illustrates:

Question: Is there anything the District can do? My 5 burning questions [are that I] would appreciate new sessions for new [principals] - Cohorts like new [vice principals]. Invest more in leaders in schools. Maximize dollars to support [leaders] in school. Look for opportunities to talk and grow” (T005).

Trust and communication played critical roles in relationship development, but so did time, which was in short supply.

Generative Dialogue

Although generative dialogue was intended to be the focus of the interviews, and it was part of the protocols (Appendices C and D) to specifically ask about participants’ views of the process, commentary was absent in many of the transcripts. At this stage, it is unclear why this occurred.

While those who did comment on generative dialogue were positive about the process, there was a lack of understanding of what generative dialogue is, and its purpose in the District. Trust may need to be developed in order for principals and vice principals to fully engage in the generative dialogue process, specifically because it is a new concept in K-12 leadership. It is also possible that, having experienced the first wave of

generative dialogue conversations, and read this report, that participants will develop greater trust in the process.

Discussion

Evaluation of the Generative Dialogue Process

In this section, we will explore the available data on evaluation of the generative dialogue process, and interpret the data from an evidence based perspective, by comparing and contrasting what we know about generative dialogue with the literature on professional development for principals and vice principals.

Although there were few statements evaluating the generative dialogue process in the data, those that were there were positive. In addition, discussion in the consultation meetings reflected a positive attitude towards the generative dialogue process, particularly in giving participants space to explore issues that were important to them with an active listener. However, more data is needed to evaluate whether or not the generative dialogue approach is the right fit for supporting the professional development of principals and vice principals within the District, and whether it is a satisfactory approach to facilitating the professional growth of principals and vice principals. This is particularly important, given that it is a mandated activity within the District; without the knowledge that it is beneficial to those involved, it has the potential for negative consequences if it is not appreciated by those who did not participate in the study.

It is also unclear whether generative dialogue is supporting school improvement, although this is a goal for the Wave II analysis, when longitudinal data on perceptions of effectiveness of generative dialogue on school improvement will be available.

Although extensive current literature on generative dialogue is not available, a helpful model for understanding the approach is Salter and Gannon's (2015) analysis of coaching and mentoring through six disciplines. There is significant overlap between coaching and mentoring, with one or other approach often being related to the specific discipline in which it is applied. The model categorizes coaching and mentoring approaches across two dimensions: the first dimension is directive versus non-directive, while the second dimension is deficit versus developmental. A *directive* approach focuses on *instruction* as the means of professional development, while a *non-directive* approach focuses on *facilitation*. A *deficit* approach is not focusing on a weakness on the part of the person being coached or mentored; rather, professional development occurs through the mentor or coach *sharing* their greater past knowledge or experience to guide the coachee or mentee, who has less knowledge or experience. In contrast, a *developmental* approach assumes the professional skills required already exist within the coachee or mentee, so the approach is more mutual.

If Salter and Gannon's (2015) model is applied to generative dialogue, it clearly fits within the *non-directive, developmental* quadrant. Other approaches with a similar profile are executive coaching and coaching psychologists. In order to evaluate whether generative dialogue, as a non-directive, developmental approach, is adequate for the

professional development of principals and vice principals, it is helpful to explore the challenges they are facing, as reflected in the data, and to consider approaches with different profiles, and how they might meet the needs of coaches and mentees. This is particularly important, given the changing role of school leaders (Humada-LudekeCarlos, 2013).

Improving Supports to Relationships for Principals and Vice Principals

The overarching theme that emerged from the data was that principals and vice principals value relationships, and need support in addressing challenges to their day to day relationships with staff, students, and parents. In this section, we will explore what the generative dialogue approach has to offer in terms of support to relationships, and compare and contrast with approaches to the professional growth of principals and vice principals that are in the current literature.

Support in Managing Stress/Conflict

The management of stress and conflict for teachers was explored in depth in previous work (Hartney, 2008; 2016). Stressors for teachers are multi-faceted, and there are numerous evidence-based approaches that have been developed and demonstrated as effective in the literature, which have recently consolidated into a stress management framework for teachers (Hartney, 2016). For each type of stressor (individual or focused on the person, student-related, team-related, or task-related), there are both individual strategies that can be implemented by one person, and whole school strategies that can be implemented by the Principal or Vice Principal, with the cooperation of their staff.

For example, individual strategies to address disruptive students include learning classroom management skills (Dicke et al, 2015; Jackson et al, 2013), while those to manage violent students include non-violent crisis intervention (Torem, 2000), both of which would require a *directive, deficit*-based approach to professional development. Whole school strategies to address disruptive and violent students include pre-referral intervention teams (Lhospital & Gregory, 2009), which would require a *non-directive, deficit*-based approach, and school-wide positive behaviour support (Ross & Horner, 2007), which would require a *non-directive, deficit*-based approach.

Identifying the most appropriate strategy for each individual principals or vice-principals' situation, whether it involves providing an individualized professional development strategy for specific teachers working with challenging student, or a whole school approach, would be an ideal discussion for coaching or mentoring. It could also fit within the generative dialogue structure, as a goal, with a strategy, identified resources, and evidence for effectiveness post-intervention. However, if order for this to be effective within a coaching, mentoring, or generative dialogue discussion, the mentor, coach, or generative dialogue leader would need to be equipped with the required information to convey to the principal or vice principal, which would shift the focus to a *directive, deficit*

approach, rather than an *non-directive*, inconsistent with what we know about generative dialogue. Alternatively, the District could develop a mechanism for addressing these concerns, perhaps developing and offering professional development training on these individual and/or whole school approaches, and communicating these opportunities to all principals and vice principals. That way, the strategy could be self-identified by the Principal and Vice-Principal within the generative dialogue discussion, without requiring direction from the generative dialogue leader, and preserving the integrity of the generative dialogue approach as *non-directive*, and *developmental*.

Supporting Mental Health in the School Setting

Mental health issues were a key concern for some principals and vice principals, and affected their relationships with both staff and students. It was clear in a consultation meeting in which this was discussed, that this is a knowledge gap that causes considerable stress for principals and vice principals, particularly when they have a concern about the mental health of staff. Again, addressing this professional development need is out of the scope of generative dialogue, and requires some *directive, deficit*-based mental health literacy training (Kutcher et al, 2013) to raise the principal's or vice-principal's level of comfort addressing mental health issues within the school, in both students and staff.

Time Management Skills

A key theme that emerged from the data concerned the time constraints that principals and vice principals are limited by, which impede their ability to develop relationships, and to simultaneously initiate and manage broads changes to the curriculum and other aspects of school life. While creative solutions to address the issue of relationship building within the time constraints of the school day could be helpful, principals and vice principals might also benefit from access to time management training, a *directive, deficit* type of professional development, which could provide principals and vice principals with a skills set they have not previously developed within the structured school day as a classroom teacher.

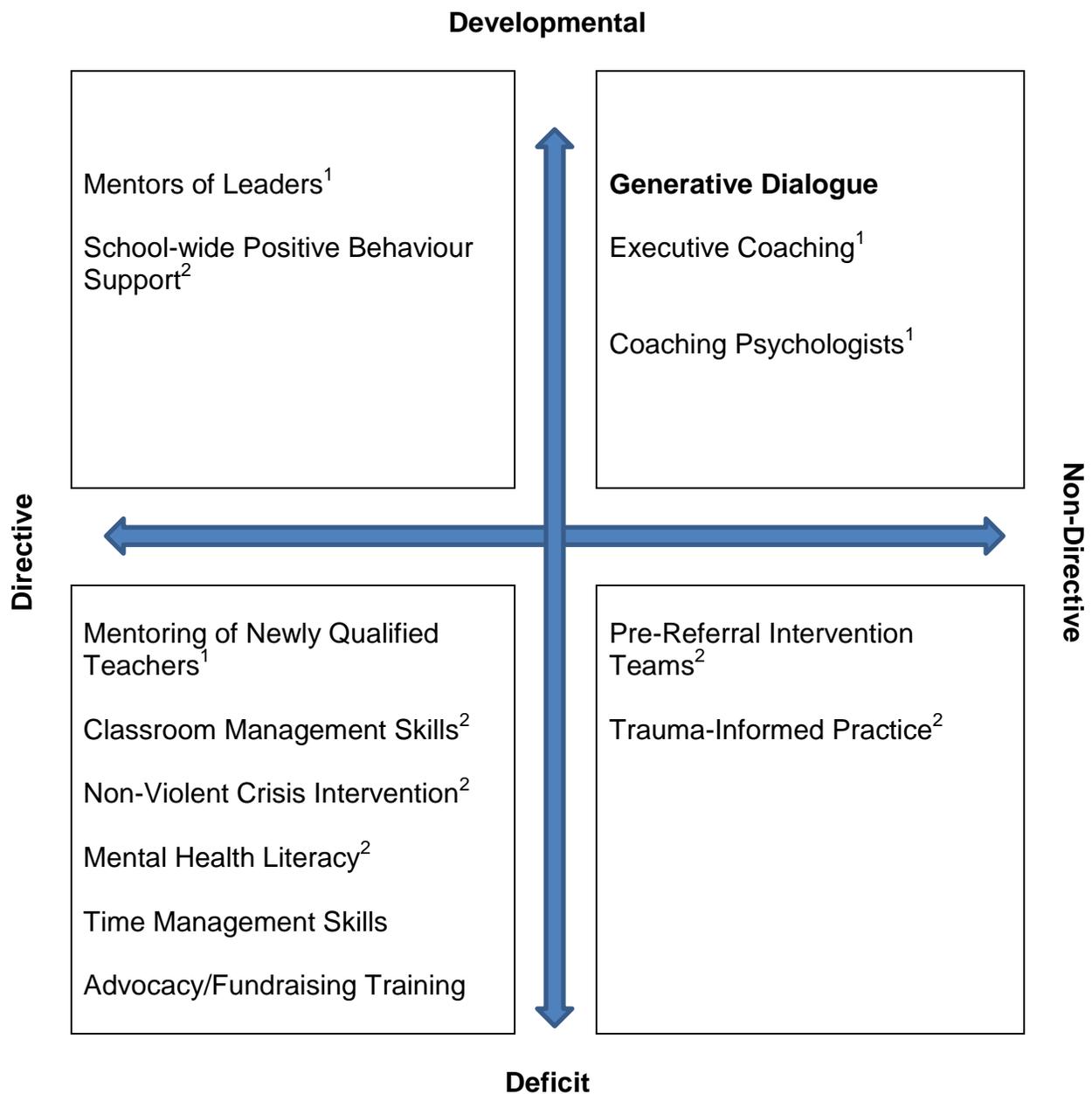
Resources

As with time management, although creative ideas could be developed to access or redistribute available resources within the generative dialogue relationship, for principals and vice principals to take on the leadership role of advocate or fundraiser, some *directive, deficit* type training could be helpful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, given the scope of generative dialogue as a *non-directive, developmental* approach, it has the potential to meet some, but not all of the professional growth needs expressed by principals and vice principals in the interviews. Specifically, there are several *directive, deficit based* training opportunities that would address the needs of principals and vice principals, particularly those who are new to administrative roles.

A dimensional analysis of how generative dialogue, and other approaches which are relevant, fit within the *directive-non-directive* and *developmental-deficit* based dimensions, is included in figure 3. Several evidence-based approaches to addressing various aspects of stress management for teachers, extracted from previous work by Hartney (2016), are included.



¹ Cited in Salter & Gannon (2015)

² Cited in Hartney (2016)

Figure 3: Dimensional analysis of generative dialogue and other relevant approaches to professional growth

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered to facilitate greater participation and strengthen the quality of data in Wave II.

Recommendation 1: Improve knowledge translation of generative dialogue

While there has been significant investment in the generative dialogue process, it is clear that participants did not fully understand the purpose or the process, at the end of Wave I, even though they may have been through hours of training and several iterations of generative dialogue interviews. Improving understanding may also improve the low response rate for the research project, and provide more data to evaluate the effectiveness and adequacy of the approach in the Greater Victoria School District.

Exploring other means of communication, in addition to the current approach of training sessions provided through presentations and school visits, may facilitate greater understanding. For example, circulating an accessible, one-page factsheet defining and explaining “generative dialogue, and/or “professional growth,” and addressing frequently asked questions may be helpful. Some of the information and diagrams which were developed for this report could be adapted or further developed for this purpose.

Another issue which may be impacting understanding is how well the current approach fits the BC culture. For example, using the term “professional growth” in favour of widely recognized terminology, such as “professional development” or “pro-d,” which are widely accepted and understood terms in British Columbia, may be adding to the confusion. Using terms such as “coaching” and “mentoring,” may improve transparency about what is required of principals and vice principals in this process, even if the process continues to be provided within the generative dialogue framework.

Finally, the expectations of principals and vice principals in relation to generative dialogue needs to be more fully explained. Ideally, this will include some sort of consultation or input from the principals and vice principals themselves, which could be incorporated into Wave II, or could be conducted separately. The sense of a lack of transparency concerning expectations is impeding trust in the process and buy-in from the District community. The District should also consider other ways to elicit feedback from non-participating principals and vice-principals

Recommendation 2: Provide more guidance for note-takers to improve the quality of data collection

The data received typically did not follow the structure of the generative dialogue notes that was presented in the training provided by the developers. It is unclear whether this was a result of the conversation taking its own direction, and the leaders of the process not feeling the need to follow the formal structure of the approach, perhaps focusing instead of establishing trust or building rapport, or whether the note takers were unable to keep up with the conversation, and structure their notes accordingly.

To improve the process for Wave II, it would be helpful to provide more guidance to note takers, for example, to provide more explanation to the guidelines in appendix 4, or to provide a template for note taking that includes the main headings of the generative dialogue approach. It would be particularly helpful if note takers could ensure that they record the discussion about the approach itself, and what participants find helpful or insufficient for meeting their professional growth needs. It will also be important for note-takers to capture the participants' analysis of how well the process supported them reaching their self-identified professional goals, and its alignment with school improvement.

Recommendation 3: Explore the full scope of professional development needs of new principals and vice principals

As illustrated in figure 3, while generative dialogue is helpful for supporting principals and vice principals to develop their own professional growth plans, and encouraging them to act on these plans, it has limited capacity to address the full scope of professional growth needs expressed by principals and vice principals. In particular, providing content knowledge and skills training would be helpful in addressing a range of professional growth needs which have been identified by principals and vice principals, and whole school approaches would be beneficial in some instances, particularly where behavioural issues or trauma concerns significantly affect the school community and culture.

Recommendation 4: Develop and provide training for principals and vice principals of mental health literacy

Mental health literacy requires specific content knowledge to address principals' and vice principals' needs for a greater understanding of mental health issues in the school community, as well as clarifying role boundaries and appropriate safeguards and actions to take when a potential mental illness is identified in a member of the school community. This appears to be an urgent need, and

options for addressing it should be explored as soon as possible with appropriately qualified internal and external professionals.

Recommendation 5: Develop and provide training for principals and vice-principals on stress management

Stress and burnout in teachers is well-recognized as an international phenomenon, and principals and vice principals have additional stress loads. Stress management is a learned set of skills that are important to coping and being successful in leading school improvement, particularly with the ambitious agenda currently underway in the Greater Victoria School District mission, vision, values, and strategic direction. Stress management for school leaders has the potential to have a ripple effect throughout the school community, reducing stress for the staff as a whole, and the students. It is recommended that stress management training for school leaders is prioritized as an area of professional growth.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Letter

Appendix B: Reminder Email

Appendix C: Guidelines for Generative Dialogue Leader

Appendix D: Interview Note-Taking Guidelines for Generative Dialogue Interviews with Principals and Vice Principals

Appendix E: Certificate of Research Ethics Board clearance

Appendix A: Information Letter

Dear Principal/Vice Principal:

April 2017

You are invited to participate in a research project, *A Research Inquiry to Explore the Effectiveness of Generative Dialogue in Leadership Development in School District 61*. Please keep this letter for your future reference.

This project is being led by Dr Elizabeth Hartney, R.Psych, in consultation with Dr Jo Axe and Dr Doug Hamilton, who are faculty at Royal Roads University. A Research Assistant may be hired to assist with transcribing and initial analysis of the data. Dr Hartney is the Principal Investigator and can be contacted to address any questions regarding this study at (250) 391-2600 extension 4277, or Elizabeth.Hartney@royalroads.ca. Verification of the authenticity of this research project can be obtained by contacting Dr Deborah Zornes, Director, Research Services, at (250) 391-2600 extension 4486, or Deborah.Zornes@royalroads.ca. There are no external sponsors, as this project is funded by the School District, there are no conflicts of interest in this study, and it has been approved by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board.

The research project will provide insight into the effectiveness of the generative dialogue process being introduced in School District 61 schools in April/May 2017, including its impact on school improvement, and Principal/Vice Principal satisfaction with the process. Data gathered during generative dialogue sessions with consenting participants will be sent to a team of researchers at Royal Roads University, where they will be retained, transcribed, and analyzed as baseline data, and compared with data gathered a year later. As the Superintendent/Associate Superintendent may be present during some of the generative dialogue sessions, should you wish to have a follow up conversation afterwards, you may contact the researcher directly.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary, and anonymous, and will have no bearing on your employment or advancement with the school district. You are under no obligation to participate.

If you choose to participate, please make a photocopy of the notes provided to you at the end of your generative dialogue session, and, without adding any identifying information, place the copy in the stamped addressed envelope provided and mail in to Royal Roads University.

By submitting a copy of your generative dialogue notes, you are consenting to participation in the study. All Principals and Vice-Principals are being invited to participate, with no obligation to do so. The researchers, the generative dialogue team,

and the school district staff will not know who has or has not participated. There will be no evaluation of individual participants or schools through this process. As the data submitted are anonymous, there is no way to withdraw your data once submitted, however, you may choose not to submit data during the future rounds of generative dialogue if you do not wish to continue to participate.

There are no anticipated harms to participating in this study, as it will not require further information to be disclosed that you will provide in the course of your regular duties. There are no financial costs to you or your school, and participation will take approximately 5-10 minutes of your time to read this letter, photocopy your notes from the generative dialogue session, and put it in the mail. Anticipated benefits to you are through making explicit the issues that affect your professional development, and your role as a school leader. Additionally, you may benefit from continuation and expansion of the program, if it is deemed successful. The Greater Victoria School District will benefit through gaining knowledge regarding whether the generative dialogue process is effective for professional development, and for school improvement. Society will potentially benefit through stronger leadership in schools, and ideally, through school improvement; the project will also demonstrate the appropriateness of using public funding for this purpose. The researchers will benefit through engagement in a valuable research project, raising the profile of the university and expanding their research portfolios. They may also gain expertise in the generative dialogue process.

All Principals and Vice Principals will have the opportunity to attend a presentation of the research findings at the end of the first stage of data collection, and at the end of the second stage. Interim and final reports will be provided to the School District. The research findings may also be used in publications and conference presentations by the researchers. The intellectual property for the research will be owned by the Greater Victoria School District.

Participants will not be identified at any time, and participants' names will not appear on any final documentation (whether the report is published or unpublished). All data collected will remain confidential; data will be kept in a locked cabinet. Only members of the research team specified above will have access to raw data. Data will be retained until such time as agreed with the School District for destruction.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Hartney, Ph.D., R.Psych.
Professor, School of Leadership Studies

Appendix B: Reminder Email

Dear

I am writing to remind you of the opportunity to participate in the Generative Dialogue research project, being conducted by Royal Roads University. This is a valuable opportunity for you to provide input into the future direction of the Greater Victoria School District.

To participate, simply make a photocopy of the notes provided to you after the Generative Dialogue discussion(s) you recently engaged in, and mail in your copy, either in the pre-addressed, stamped envelope you were provided with, or through regular mail to:

Dr Elizabeth Hartney,
Royal Roads University,
2005 Sooke Road,
Victoria BC

I have attached a copy of the information letter you previously received, which provides details on the project. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me at 250 391 2600 extension 4277, or by email to Elizabeth.Hartney@RoyalRoads.ca

Any information you provide will be kept in confidence, and no personally identifying information will be divulged at any time during or after the project.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth

Appendix C: Interview Guidelines for Generative Dialogue Leader During Interviews with Principals and Vice Principals

Before the Interview:

- At the start of the interview, inform the Principal or Vice Principal that a research project is being conducted at Royal Roads University, and that they will have the option to submit a copy of their notes after the interview.

After the Interview:

- If the Superintendent/Associate Superintendent is present during the generative dialogue session, s/he should leave for the latter two parts of the interview (participants commenting on their experience of generative dialogue and being informed about the study) to avoid any undue influence on the participant
- Invite the Principal or Vice Principal to comment on the experience, whether it is more positive or negative than previous professional development they have had as a Principal or Vice Principal, and why
- Remind the Principal or Vice Principal that we are conducting a study on the generative dialogue process, provide the invitation letter and envelope, and briefly inform them that if they choose to participate, to photocopy their notes, put the copy in the envelope, and mail it in
- Do not try to influence the Principal or Vice Principal to participate in the research - provide the information and envelope and they will make up their own mind afterwards
- Do not ask if they are participating, as participation is anonymous
- Try and answer any questions they have about the study, but also let them know they can contact the lead researcher, Elizabeth Hartney, for more information (her contact details are on the information letter)

Appendix D: Interview Note-Taking Guidelines for Generative Dialogue Interviews with Principals and Vice Principals

Do:

- Write legibly (re-write the notes if necessary)
- Clearly write the date of the interview, and the start and end times on the notes
- Indicate whether this is the Principal or Vice Principal's first, second, third etc generative dialogue interview
- Write the name(s) of the interviewing team and note taker
- Use sub-headings, e.g. goals, resources, evidence etc
- Include enough detail in the notes for meaningful analysis
- Use the participants' own words, including quotations of notable comments
- Include controversial and challenging information, e.g. lack of adequate resources, substance use issues etc
- At the end of the interview, invite the Principal or Vice Principal to comment on the experience, whether it is more positive or negative than previous professional development they have had as a Principal or Vice Principal, and why
- Remind the Principal or Vice Principal that we are conducting a study on the generative dialogue process, provide the invitation letter and envelope, and briefly inform them that if they choose to participate, to photocopy their notes, put the copy in the envelope, and mail it in
- Try and answer any questions they have about the study, but also let them know they can contact the lead researcher, Elizabeth Hartney, for more information (her contact details are on the information letter)
- If the Superintendent is present during the generative dialogue session, he should leave for the latter two parts of the interview (participants commenting on their experience of generative dialogue and being informed about the study) to avoid any undue influence on the participant

Don't:

- Include any identifying information in the notes, i.e. the name of the Principal or Vice Principal, specific teachers, staff, students, or parents. Instead, use roles if required e.g. EA, learning support teacher, parent of a child with special needs etc.
- Include names of the school, neighbourhood etc. Instead, use characteristics to assist understanding, e.g rural/ urban neighbourhood, Indigenous students, ESL etc.
- Try to influence the Principal or Vice Principal to participate in the research - provide the information and they will make up their own mind afterwards
- Ask if they are participating, as participation is anonymous

Appendix E: Certificate of Research Ethics Board Clearance



April 5, 2018

Ethical Review – Elizabeth Hartney

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter confirms that the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board (RRU REB) has approved research for the project: **A research inquiry to explore the effectiveness of generative dialogue in leadership**, in accordance with TCPS 2 (2014) *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* and [RRU Research Ethics Policy](#).

Approval was originally granted on **April 25, 2017**, renewable, pending any additional approvals required by the sponsoring organization or any other organization.

Should you require any additional information, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gina Armellino".

Gina Armellino

Research Ethics Coordinator