

**Adams, P., Mombourquette, C., & Townsend, D. (2019).  
*Leadership in education: The power of generative dialogue.*  
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*Leadership in Education: The Power of Generative Dialogue* presents a framework and process in which school leaders use inquiry to draw individual teacher and leader reflection into collective professional learning. The book is not only a conceptual proposition or summary, but a demonstration of “*how and how well*” (p. xvi) the elements of *generative dialogue* catalyse to enhance teacher competency. The authors’ framework is a crystallization of research with over 360 schools, including outside Canada (see Chaseling et al., 2016). Thus, readers can feel confident that the ideas in this book rest on a solid empirical spine. From a field-based perspective, the authors’ prolonged and extensive grounding in research with schools, and their background in classroom teaching and school and system leadership, lends credibility to their argument. This credibility is important because even though research-informed, data-driven decision making has been central in the school improvement discourse for some time (Schildkamp et al., 2013), educators’ reluctance regarding the value and transferability of published research persists (Flynn, 2019; Wahlgren & Aarkrog, 2020). Through both content and structure, this book has potential to narrow the divide, which aligns with their intention to offer something with “direct applicability” (p. 220) to schools.

### **Thesis and Organization of Chapters**

*Leadership in Education* is grounded in Schön’s (1983) argument that, through reflection on practice, teachers construct a legitimate knowledge base. In assuming his “epistemology of practice” (p. 42), Adams et al. advocate for the de-privatization of the reflective process. In this regard, they join company with a host of scholars who emphasize critical and collaborative inquiry, collegiality, and team-based, self-directed learning (see Gordon, 2005). Where Adams et al. depart, however, is in casting school and system leaders as “provocateurs” whose central role is to question as a form of feedback, and to instill inquiry not only as teachers’ self-analytical tool, but as their collective commitment to organizational growth. Generative dialogue is a pedagogy of inquiry rather than a list of principals’ prescriptions. Through gentle interrogation of practice, or “healthy disruption” as they write in the preface, leaders-as-provocateurs model curiosity and open conversational space for teachers to contemplate their practice. Such an approach is antithetical to the top-down assumptions of instructional leadership that has held sway for decades (Hallinger et al., 2020).

The heart of generative dialogue is growth. The school leader’s role is to be a steward of the conditions under which that growth can happen. This point is primarily made in Chapters 1 and 2. The importance of visioning, alignment of goals at all levels of the system, and a commitment to student learning as the *raison d’être* of all activity are raised in these chapters. For many readers, these will be recognizable factors that contribute to effective schools. In re-emphasizing their importance, Adams et al. provide an uncontested foundation from which to launch their argument for generative dialogue. The importance and utility of inquiry is also planted in these chapters. By way of example, on p. 11 they compare a teacher’s goal statement to an inquiry to show that statements have inertia, but questions have telos. In doing this, they orient the reader toward a mindset of inquiry and emphasize the role that reflection plays in professional learning and growth.

What is refreshing from the outset, is that Adams et al. challenge the valorization of external expertise. While they do not ride the sharp edge that Eacott (2017) has in his claim of the field's cultish leaning on gurus, their suggestion that the "answer is in the room" (p. 1) is a much-needed affirmation of teachers' professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). To this end, Chapter 2 includes an in-depth discussion of learning communities, including a table that depicts varying stages of development from withdrawn to generative, and another with key questions regarding the dimensions of learning communities. One can imagine a staff using these tables for self-assessment or as prompts to generate discussion.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to generative leadership, a model that has at its core teaching and leadership that is focused on providing the best opportunity for all students to learn. Adams et al. preface the explanation of their model with an overview of key developments in scholarship on instructional leadership. While they clearly center school principals as instructional leaders in schools, their model of generative leadership privileges listening, observing, and questioning. The cultivation of mutual trust, including and especially the principal's trust in teachers to pursue meaningful inquiries, is the foundation of generative leadership. While this argument is well established in the leadership literature (e.g., Kutsyuruba, Walker, & Noonan, 2016), Adams et al. reinforce that generative leadership fundamentally requires principals to trust a process in which they are not expected to provide all the answers. This approach challenges the entrenched organizational hierarchy of school systems in which principals are comprehensively held accountable.

The idea of "leading without answers" (p. 91) is the sub-title of Chapter 4, which is where generative dialogue is defined. Impatient readers might have wished for this chapter to appear at the front of the book, for this is where the central argument comes to life. Generative dialogue is defined as a "process of deliberate conversations among leaders and teachers, focusing on learning and leadership growth" (p. 92). The authors specify it as a "rigorous set of skills" that enables conversations about "professional practice...that [brings] into existence new ideas and thoughts that lead to more purposeful action" (p. 96). The reference to skill-set clearly situates generative dialogue in the behaviorist leadership camp (Northouse, 2019), yet the "sets of understandings" (p. 96) of their framework have quite a theoretical reach. This reach includes the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978), Lave and Wenger's communities of practice (1991), Mezirow's (1991) adult learning theory, and "the person-centered perspectives of Adler" (p. 96) (Ansbacher, H., & Ansbacher, R., 1956). These are three pieces of their four-part framework. A truncated genealogy of these ideas is provided, but readers should not expect to be well-versed after reading this chapter, if this is a first encounter. In my read, however, these theories and concepts are the assumptions that drive and justify the generative dialogue process, and they are not intended to give explanatory power in a substantive way. Thus, the explanation provided is sufficient for the task.

Socratic questioning is the fourth element of generative dialogue. Though a practice and not a theory, Socratic questioning is a strength of their framework as it gives clarity and depth to a skill that can easily be taken for granted and poorly performed. This approach matters since growth-inspiring questioning is the embodiment of generative dialogue. The remainder of Chapter 4 is concentrated on the communicative techniques of generative dialogue. Here is where Socratic questioning is fleshed out as Adams et al. thoughtfully challenge the reader to reconsider how praise, judgment, criticism, and anecdote are used. Their point is augmented with a brief section called "requisite habits of mind" (p. 106), that inventory posturings that must accompany words in generative dialogue. One can envision p. 106 dog-eared, with chunks of highlighting from this page to the end of the chapter, because here is where readers can glean concrete examples for questioning and feedback. If one is serious about mastering generative dialogue, Chapter 4 is where the tutorial happens.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the power of reflection and collaboration, respectively. In their elaboration on reflection, a distinction is made between professional development and professional learning. These chapters link the latter to generative dialogue and argue that reflection constitutes and is constituted by planning for professional growth. Self-assessment templates to support reflection are shared. The templates refer to a *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* and *Teaching Quality Standard*, which will be recognizable to an Albertan reader given that these have recently been passed as Ministerial Order (Government of Alberta, 2020). Across Canada and western educational systems, similar standards exist and emerge from research, but a reference or brief explanation would be sufficient to make this book inclusive for an international reader. Chapter 5 continues the tutorial on questioning with a brief section

called “the anatomy of the question” (p. 143), and an example of how the effective use of questioning in combination with teacher reflection might improve professional learning is explained.

Chapter 6 is on the power of collaboration and is one of the shorter chapters in this book, which makes sense because the content seems to complement an already rich discussion on learning communities and the culture of learning in Chapter 2. An important addition in Chapter 6 is a section that explains current critiques of collaboration. This observation is valuable because collaboration dominates the current zeitgeist, and its overuse can easily result in accepting it as unquestioned good that naturally emerges when you put professionals together. This brief section brings attention to groupthink, contrived collegiality, and pseudocommunity as pitfalls of collaboration. The chapter ends with a focus on the leader’s role in collaboration and is an appropriate segue to Chapter 7, which revisits instructional leadership.

Chapter 7 is a focused discussion on the responsibilities of instructional leaders with respect to professional growth, supervision, and evaluation. Readers may want to cross-reference Chapters 1 and 3 where “growth from within” (p. 11) was used to set the stage for generative dialogue and instructional leadership was explored as an enduring concept capturing the need for system-wide commitment to student learning as the driver for all actions and decisions. What becomes clear in Chapter 7 is that generative dialogue is distinct from instructional leadership. Adams et al. liken instructional leadership to a job description for school leaders; it is the “‘what’ of school leadership” and, by contrast, generative dialogue is the “means through which school leaders can actualize their leadership mandate” (p. 194). The distinction between role and process provides conceptual specificity to the idea of generative dialogue.

The book ends with the voices of superintendents and other jurisdiction leaders—principals, teachers, and an international academic—who have experienced success with employing generative dialogue in their educational contexts. Their stories serve as testimony to the power of generative dialogue, as the title claims. It is not often that teachers, principals and jurisdiction leaders have common experiences with initiatives. Ending the book in this way thus underscores a key argument of the book that generative dialogue is a system-wide commitment that reinforces how growth from within each level can contribute to the overarching aim of supporting students.

### **An Ethos of Usefulness**

Adams et al. wrote *Leadership in Education* to be “an academic resource and an interactive manual” (p. xvii). Indeed, a broad range of noteworthy leadership scholars are cited, although they are not necessarily thoroughly explored. The economy of space was understandably prohibitive, but two end-of chapter features were most helpful. First, a list of suggested readings pertinent to the focus of each chapter was provided. Second, works cited within each chapter were placed at the end of the chapter rather than at the back of the book, making it convenient to consult while reading.

A combination of an accessible, honest, and at times conversational tone, with the consistent use of interactive features, gave this book the utility the authors intended. Case studies were placed early in each chapter, accompanied by a list of questions provide a platform for analyses. Words and concepts with unique meanings are identified in bold and are included in a glossary. Sidebar questions to prompt further thinking are sprinkled throughout. Admittedly, I found those distracting, but my preference for linearity speaks more to a generational handicap than a fault in the set up. I was impressed that the authors ended the chapters with “unhelpful assumptions” in which they anticipated and countered potential negative reactions to the ideas presented, as well as their admission to imperfect beginnings with this process. Finally, journal writing prompts were provided. These qualities and features suggest this book is more textbook than treatise, but overall there is an appropriate balance of scholarly inspiration and practical content to make it well-suited for an introductory or intermediate graduate course or professional book study. Just as their belief about leadership embraces an “ethos of usefulness” (p. 13), so, too, does this book.

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