

**DIALOGUE, DIALOGUE – Talking our way into leadership**

**An exploration of the influence of extended professional dialogue on school  
leaders**

A thesis

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**CAROL JOY TEBBUTT**

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### ***Abstract***

*The complex and multilayered world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century no longer appears to support the conventional idea of great leadership being the result of the efforts of a single individual. Indeed the idea of learning communities, where educators are seen as active participants in developing educational procedures at all levels and are at the centre of the educational change process, is now widely promoted. In order to succeed in the process of building leadership in a learning community, relationships and communication are seen as key aspects, with some authors promoting dialogue as integral to the process.*

*This small-scale qualitative study uses a semi-structured interview process to gather data from eight educational leaders, working within New Zealand, who had participated in extended professional dialogues at the International Leadership Institutes (ILI) in the Waikato. The study explores the influence of that process on their professional capabilities as leaders and considers the nature and extent of their learning. It also looks at how dialogue continues to impact on their leadership practice after they have experienced repeated ILIs.*

*Theoretical and empirical research suggests that professional dialogue promotes critical thinking and inquiry through a process of consent and dissent to achieve a co-construction of knowledge. Dialogue enables a group to explore why certain presuppositions, ideas and beliefs exist within the group and to reveal why they are interacting in certain ways. It is a process that observes, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behaviour and seeks to surface these in order to construct new ways of interacting and new knowledge. This study found that by working in groups through a process of dialogue, not only did the group extend its capabilities beyond that of the sum of the individuals, but that self awareness and understanding developed and continued to have an effect on thinking and behaviour long after the actual ILI was completed.*

*The findings are of use for those who seek to use dialogue as a successful communication tool in their own leadership contexts. While the findings are*

*specific to the program under investigation, including its structure and local, historical context, they can be related to the wider world of education which asks for all involved to be focused on learning. How we learn and how we learn together is a major concern of leaders in learning. This study calls on educational leaders to explore dialogically how to enable their colleagues to be more successful in the work at hand and how to develop collective thinking, closer relationships and an ongoing way to approach diversity and change in our society.*

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## **“Dialogue, dialogue – talking our way into leadership”: An exploration of the influence of extended professional dialogues on school leaders.**

The realities we live in are the outcomes of the conversations in which we are engaged.

Kenneth Gergen, 2009.

### **CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Setting the scene**

The complex and multilayered world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century no longer appears to support the conventional idea of great leadership being the result of the efforts of a single individual. Indeed the idea of learning communities, where educators are seen as active participants in developing educational procedures at all levels and are at the centre of the educational change process, is now widely promoted (Harris, Day, Hopkins, Hadfield, Hargreaves & Chapman, 2003; Kofman & Senge, 1993; Mitchell, 1999; Schlechty, 2009; Wrigley, 2003). In order to succeed in the process of building leadership in a learning community, relationships and communication are seen as key aspects, with some authors promoting dialogue as integral to the process (Bohm, Factor, & Garret, 1991; Fisher, 2009; Isaacs, 1999; Lock & Strong, 2010; Shields & Edwards, 2005). Thus an important question for educational leaders should be: what is dialogue and how does an understanding of it assist in improving personal professional learning and leadership capacity in a practical sense in their own contexts?

Myhill, Jones and Hopper (2006), highlight that professional dialogue promotes critical thinking and inquiry through a process of consent and dissent to achieve a co-construction of knowledge. They argue that it is the process that is important rather than the outcome, because “engaging in genuine dialogue with others allows individuals to operate at a higher level of thinking than would be possible

on their own” (2006, p. 25). Dialogue enables a group to explore why certain presuppositions, ideas and beliefs exist within the group and to reveal why they are interacting in certain ways. It is a process that observes, collectively, “how hidden values and intentions can control our behaviour, and how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring” (Bohm et al., 1991).

This type of dialogue is utilised in the Waikato International Leadership Institutes (to be referred to as ILI). They are essentially a gathering of educational leaders from throughout New Zealand and some from countries such as Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa, England and Papa New Guinea. About 80 or 90 educational leaders were involved in the dialogues and this study encompasses four such ILI that occurred in a period from 2005 to 2010. At each, participants were seated in groups of 8 around circular tables for the week-long Institute. These people were usually unknown to each other at the beginning and worked as a group to explore the concepts of the dialogue. There was no systematic presentation of papers presented as would be the case at a conference. Rather, participants were firstly introduced to the notion and expectations of dialogue and then spent some time considering the nature of the process and some guidelines for proceeding. After that the dialogue started with a scoping paper and then short, ten minute think-pieces were used for the rest of the week to stimulate engagement with the topic. Facilitators were present to assist in the process of the dialogue but had no real input into the content of each groups’ exploration. Part of the process involved ‘health checks’ as Jeremy Kedian, Director of the Educational Leadership Centre at the University of Waikato, coined them. These were short ‘time-outs’ explicitly to focus on how the groups were operating and to ensure dialogue was occurring as opposed to other forms of communication.

An exploration of the way people perceive dialogue after experiencing two or more ILI and the way their thinking changes about its use is of interest for those who use it as a successful communication tool in their own leadership. The world of education asks for all involved to be focused on learning and thus *how* we learn becomes a major concern of leaders in learning. McHenry (1997) argues that “we need teacher training that focuses our energies, our personal histories, and our

commitments through the lens of this invitation to encounter”(p. 10). Leaders are called to explore dialogically how to enable their colleagues “to be more successful in the work at hand, how to release or develop potential talent that would serve that person’s institutional responsibilities as well as bring a greater sense of personal fulfilment and satisfaction in the work” (Starrat, 2005, p. 79).

## **1.2 Motivation and research focus**

As a member of the senior teaching team in the Waikato Pathways College I was involved with professional development and fostering of leadership within our learning community. As part of my own professional learning I took part in two ILI run by the Educational Leadership Centre in the University of Waikato’s Faculty of Education. I became very interested in the way my thinking about the process changed and particularly, having experienced the process on more than one occasion, how this impacted on my personal professional learning and leadership practice.

This led me to a research process in order to explore further the influence of extended professional dialogue on other school leaders. The ILIs are an example of this “extended” dialogue as they run for four or five full days. The first day begins with an introduction to dialogue and thereafter think-pieces are used to engage with the topic. I decided to interview people who had attended two or more institutes to explore how they experienced the process and what impact it had on their thinking, learning and leadership practice. I hoped to understand and describe the impact the dialogic process had on them and to focus on developing an understanding of the nature and extent of their learning and how it changed their school leadership if at all.

## **1.3 Researcher orientation**

Professional learning as a teacher in a university environment had led me to my postgraduate study in Educational Leadership. The topic of dialogue and the

leadership institute opened up a whole new world for me. My conceptual frameworks altered substantially as I focused on a social constructionist way of viewing the world. My reflective practises developed and became a 'reality' in my day-to-day world rather than just a goal to work towards. Articulation of my beliefs and my political stance on education became a possibility and my understanding of relationships and the importance of what goes on *between* people expanded. Was this true for others who had experienced these extended dialogues?

Originally my thinking was that the research question should involve considering the cognitive, spiritual and emotional impact of dialogue on people as well as their learning and the ongoing effect on their leadership. However the breadth of such an inquiry was beyond the constraints of this study and the decision was made to take a more focused look at an aspect of dialogue that related to participants' leadership. The more I focused on this, and how I wanted to explore the topic, the more my sense of how we understand the world and our reality changed. I was interested in the stories that other leaders had to tell and wanted to gather a rich, descriptive type of data that would highlight what was important to them. I was looking at the world through the eyes of a social constructionist and learning more about the way humans construct knowledge together.

The principles of dialogue allowed me to approach the topic from a highly discursive place. I too had experienced the reality of attending two extended dialogues and was truly able to relate to the participants' experiences. I was prepared for a diverse range of viewpoints that would be multi-perspective. Our interviews allowed for a negotiation of meaning about dialogue that triggered more reflection and understandings about both the process and leadership. However the irony for me was that my intention to explore dialogue was constrained by methodological concepts of commonly used research methods. I was exploring a wonderful way of creating new knowledge utilising non-dialogic methods. In any future research I undertake I would like to avoid this paradox by utilising dialogue as a way to explore the topic just as I hope that continued dialogue in the Waikato will further enhance and inform the leadership practice of

professional learners in our community and build on the questions this study addresses.

Why people participate in extended dialogue and indeed repeatedly go through the experience is an area that needs practical research. Some scholars have approached this from the perspective of how participation levels in dialogue are moderated by group diversity, resolution strategy and participant satisfaction with the group process and desire to remain in the group (Clark et al., 2000). For me the interest is in how the individual perceives the learning has occurred and what then remains with them as they return to their leadership role. Dialogue's role in conflict resolution was not a real focus as it is often discussed in business and psychology fields. The purpose of this study was more to relate how an understanding of the dialogic process carried over into the 'real world' for educational leaders. Could claims that an understanding of dialogue is vital to educational leaders as they face a future of change and diversity by Kedian and West-Burnham (2010) be substantiated by this research?

“Dialogue is a process that can allow us to become aware of our participation in a much wider whole” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 90). Do we indeed find that this is the influence of extended dialogue?

## **Chapter 2**

## **Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

A review of the literature sets a broad foundation and context for the study being undertaken. It “clearly demarcates what is and is not within the scope of the investigation, and justifies those decisions” (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 4). There are two key concepts inherent in a literature review that factor in its quality and rigor: ‘generativity’ (how this work builds on the literature) and ‘coverage’ (Boote & Beile, 2005; Cohen, Manion & Morrisson, 2007). The latter word encompasses topicality, comprehensiveness, breadth, exclusion, relevance, currency, availability and authority. Thus this chapter attempts to position the present study in its historical context while articulating the variables and phenomena important to the topic of dialogue so that the reader gains a new perspective on the literature and gains an understanding of where further investigation is possible (Bell, 2005; Boote & Beile, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007; McNab & Thomas, 2007).

### **2.2 Interpretations of Dialogue**

In a discussion of the influence of extended professional dialogue on educational leaders it is necessary to understand the origins and sources of the process as well as the ways in which dialogue is presently seen to be evolving. Key contributions, concepts and emerging theories of dialogue need to be considered before undertaking an analysis of how they impacted on a particular group of educational leaders in New Zealand. The ways in which people understand the world and make sense of a subject, from within a social constructionism world view, are considered to be culturally and historically specific (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009; Lock & Strong, 2010). Thus an understanding of social constructionism will be important to this investigation of dialogue and requires further definition in the methodology and discussion chapters.

### 2.2.1 What is the nature of dialogue?

Dialogic talk can be traced back to the type of philosophical dialogue conducted by Socrates – a process in which teacher and student shared a joint inquiry in the search for a truth unknown to both parties (Arnett, Grayson, & McDowell, 2008; Isaacs, 1999; Maranhao, 1990; Myhill, Jones, & Hopper, 2006). Dia – has the meaning of “through” or “between” and logos is generally considered to mean “word”(Cissna & Anderson, 1998; Isaacs, 1999; Stewart, 1978). Shields and Edwards (2005) go even further back to pre Socratic times in order to understand the meaning of the word dialogue; they offer Heraclitus’s meaning whereby “logos” is not just understood to mean word but rather signifies “an ordering principle of the world” that represents “the unity that exists in experience, the oneness in which all things participate” (p. 14). Indeed the ancient Greek usage of “logos” covers a wide range of meanings such as sentence, speak, account, reason, definition, language and more (Maranhao, 1990). Bohm (1996) proposes that dialogue is seen as a ‘flow of meaning between people’ and Isaacs (1999) furthers this idea by offering that the best definition of logos may be expressed as “relationship” (p.19).

Buber’s essays, however, were some of the first that highlighted the understanding of dialogue as essentially about “the between” (Buber, 1958). He focused on the place between us and others that exists when we come into relationship with another (Bohm et al., 1991; Buber, 1958; Friedman, 1976). As well as Buber, the literature suggests that there were three other main theorists who could be described as ‘touchstone theorists of dialogue’: these are Bakhtin, Gadamer and Habermas and they each have a different focus in their treatment of dialogue (Arnett et al., 2008; Isaacs, 1999). Since the turn of the century, however, the complexity of our understanding about dialogue has increased and differences within dialogical practice themselves have emerged. In a social constructionist world we are faced with a plethora of ways of interpreting what dialogue is (Anderson & Cissna, 2008; Factor, 2004; Gergen & Gergen, 2004; Lock & Strong, 2010; Maranhao, 1990; Mifsud & Johnson, 2000). A consideration of these ways of describing and ascribing to dialogue, as offered in the literature, is helpful to understand how the process impacts on leadership.

### **2.2.2 Dialogue versus discussion**

Many authors still fall back on describing what dialogue is not; that it is not debate, nor discussion (Barge, 2002; McKeon, 1990; Shields & Edwards, 2005; Schein, 1993). Isaacs (1999) effectively analyses “discussing” as leading to making a decision. He suggests the word “decide” means to resolve difficulties by cutting through them, which gives us a clear picture of how the roots of this word literally mean to “murder the alternative” (Isaacs, 1999, p.45). In contrast he notes dialogue “seeks to open possibilities and see new options” while discussion “seeks closure and completion” (1999, p.45). Management and communication experts argue that discussion and debate are valid problem-solving and decision-making processes within groups (Barge, 2002; Gordon, 2000; Senge, 2005; Zorn & Thompson, 2000). However, while Schein (2003) agrees, he qualifies this idea by claiming “only if one can assume that the group members understand each other well enough to be talking the same language” (p.34). It is paradoxical he says that “such a state of sharing categories probably cannot be achieved unless somewhere in the group’s history some form of dialogue has taken place” (2003, p.34).

### **2.2.3 Foundations of dialogue**

Stewart (1978) addressed what he felt were the foundations of dialogic communication and indeed suggested that a focus on “the dynamic, complex, context dependent communicative transaction” is what makes this perspective revolutionary at his time of writing. He built on Buber’s (1958) ideas of ‘reciprocal bond’, ‘between’ or ‘being in relation’ to other. Distinguishing characteristics that he suggests are needed for a dialogical approach to communication are experientialism, alongside a focus on self and awareness, as well as a focus on ‘holism’. This last characteristic embraces “a multitude of interdependent cognitive, affective, behavioural and contextual variables” (Stewart, 1978, p.185).

A number of writers at the time helped to build on this foundation for the later work of philosophers and those in the education and communication field; such scholars as Johannesen (1971), Poulaksos (1974), Friedman (1976), and Keller (1979). By 1981 Arnett had written his key essay “Toward a phenomenological dialogue” which, along with the thinking of Paolo Freire, accessed dialogue in terms of reflection and relationship. In ‘A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues for transforming education’, Freire and Shor (1987) define dialogue as “a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it” (p. 98). Arnett’s phenomenological perspective on dialogue “emphasises the metaphysical and epistemological primacy of relationship and offers an understanding of embedded intentionality within existence” (Arnett et al., 2008, p. 3).

#### **2.2.4 Schools of Dialogue**

From the four “touchstone theorists”, emerging schools of dialogic theory are now present in the literature: Jurgen Habermas, for whom dialogue is seen as attentive to the structures of public discourse, (Arnett et al., 2008; Lock & Strong, 2010; Maranhao, 1990); Mikhail Bahktin, for whom dialogue is seen as dialectical with linguistic attention paid to the “third”, a multivocal, cultural form of knowing (Cissna & Anderson, 1998; Mifsud & Johnson, 2000); Martin Buber, who approaches dialogue as a revelatory moment characterised by the “between” and the “emergent” (Friedman, 1976; McHenry, 1997; Stewart, 1978) and Hans-Georg Gadamer who sees dialogue as a fusion of horizons of acknowledged biases (Arnett et al., 2008; Lock & Strong, 2010; Wright, 2000).

#### **2.2.5 Social constructionism and dialogue**

Ideas of social construction suggest that how we perceive the world and what we believe about reality is largely defined by how we approach the world. For the social constructionist, how we approach the world “depends on the social relationship of which we are a part” (Gergen, 2009, p.2). Thus no one single description of dialogue can be said to be “the truth”. Different authors interpret

the nature of dialogue differently depending on the philosophy and ontology they have.

Maranhao (1990) analyses six different interpretations of the nature of dialogue: from the viewpoint of psychotherapy and anthropology, from the viewpoint of philosophy, religion and literature and in relation to truth and rhetoric. He explores the implications of engaging in either 'descriptive' or 'ideal' understandings of dialogue. Descriptive dialogue, as a product of modernity, aims at mutual understanding of meaning, while within ideal dialogue, the identity of each dialogic subject and the 'dwelling' between them emerges from the dialogic encounter (Maranhao, 1990, p. 5).

Writers with a phenomenological viewpoint look at the nature of dialogue as happening between people. For the phenomenologist "knowledge is neither a matter of unbiased contact with objects of the external world (as it is for naturalism or realism) nor adequate apprehension of purely cognitive states (as it is for idealism). Instead, knowledge emerges "in the meeting of, or relationship between, subject and object in consciousness" (Stewart, 1978, p 186). That is, reality exists in phenomena, not in subjects or objects alone but in the subject-object relationship which is an important insight of Edmund Husserl's and "the hallmark of all phenomenologies subsequent to his" (Stewart, 1978, p. 187).

From a Buberian viewpoint the unfolding of the sphere of "the between" is called the "dialogical" (Friedman, 1976). Poulakos (1974) emphasised that "the between" or "relationship" involves more than "the mere sum of two individual entities", suggesting that it is "the interhuman" force which sustains dialogue (p.209). Arnett (1981) contrasts this with the psychological; that which happens within the souls of each person and which "is only the secret accompaniment to the dialogue" (p.203). He agrees that the meaning of this dialogue "is found in neither one nor the other of the partners, nor in both added together, but in their interchange" (p. 203). He follows Stewart's suggestion that this is a radically new perspective on communication. This distinction between the 'dialogical' and the 'psychological' is explored by a number of writers (Arnett, 1981; Friedman, 1976; Rogers, 2007; Taminiaux, 2008). The latter psychological stance views

dialogue as having an emphasis on becoming oneself, or developing one's own potential. However, Arnett (1981) agrees with Friedman when he suggests that a person may have to give up his or her potential in order to answer an invited dialogue from another. Rogers (2007) with his psychological perspective proposes dialogue can happen only when one "is genuine and without 'front' or facade, openly being the feelings and attitudes which at the moment are flowing *in* him" (p.242). Arnett takes issue with this point because he says "in a dialogue, feelings and attitudes emerge *between* persons, not *in* them". This he argues "is a basic difference between the possessive nature of psychologism and the interdependence of dialogue" (Arnett, 1981. p.204).

By 1991, the physicist David Bohm highlighted a number of ways in which the nature of dialogue could be described; including a picturesque image of "a river of meaning flowing around and through the participants" (1991, p.3). He and colleagues suggested that dialogue allows the listener to mirror back immediately some of the assumptions and unspoken implications of what is being expressed along *with that which is being avoided* [researcher's italics] (Bohm et al., 1991, p.3).\* The italicised phrase constitutes an essential component of dialogue and indeed is an area that appears to link the process of dialogue to that of social constructionism. Assumptions are highlighted and exposed, as are areas of conflicting world views that may normally remain hidden. Silences are important and cultural perspectives are aired. The understanding is that when people define their reality they are speaking from a particular standpoint. Consequently "for any state of affairs a potentially unlimited number of descriptions and explanations should be possible" (Gergen, 2009, p.5). In the process of speaking together in this way Gergen (2009) suggests we can create new knowledge and "bring new worlds into being" (p.4).

### **2.2.6 Dialogue as 'thinking together'**

Bohm's work has been developed and adapted by a group of people from MIT who are concerned with utilising dialogue within organisations and are part of "The Dialogue Project". As Peter Senge says, in his introduction to William

Isaac's book 'Dialogue and the art of thinking together', "I have come to conclude that there is a deep hunger in the modern world for meaning and the core practices whereby human beings make meaning together" (Isaacs, 1999, p. 3). Isaacs believes that "dialogue is a discipline of collective thinking and inquiry, a process for transforming the quality of conversation and, in particular the thinking that lies beneath it" (1993, p. 25). He initially defines dialogue as a "sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions and certainties that compose everyday experience" (Isaacs, 1993, p. 25). This comes close to the type of dialogue experienced in the International Leadership Institutes organised by Jeremy Kedian (University of Waikato).

Edgar Schein (1993) regards communication failures and cultural misunderstandings as issues that prevent humans from framing problems in a common way and that make dealing with the problem difficult to do constructively (p.31). He and others argue that the practice of dialogue helps improve thinking processes by gradually creating a shared set of meanings and thus assists in situations where solutions to problems involve shared understanding and creativity (Bohm et al., 1991; Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 1993).

Arnett et al., (2008), point out a different way to see this collective thinking; as an "enlarged communicative mentality" (p.3). They highlight the fact that the key to dialogue is that it is not owned by a solitary person but is in fact *emergent* from the interactions of the people involved. They also point to the fact that dialogue is content rich and not just "process-specific". A vital consideration for Arnett et al. (2008) is one that bears repeating:

Finally dialogue *cannot be demanded*, and it is a companion to other forms of speech. Martin Buber outlined monologue, technical dialogue, and dialogue all as essential to human construction. Whenever people privilege dialogue as the only form of discourse, it fades from a relational gathering and something darker takes its place. Demand masquerading as dialogue is simply what it is: demand. (p. 3)

'Thinking together' then, is one way in which writers such as Bohm (1996), Isaacs (1993), Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers (2005) as well as Shields

and Edwards (2005) describe the process and intention of dialogue. For Isaacs “the intention of dialogue is to reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act” (1999, p.19). Shields and Edwards also suggest that for them “dialogue is not another word for ‘talk’ but a way of being in relation to other, often different, ideas, cultures, perspectives and yes people” (2005, p. 4). They do not attempt a definition in the beginning of their book as they describe it as too linear an approach and suggest that as we delve deeper into the ideas and facets of dialogue we will find that ideas evolve and fold back on themselves and intersect at other points which echoes Bohm’s (1996) notion of enfolding.

Indeed, reviewing the literature for important concepts in the process of dialogue it appeared that a large number of definitions for dialogue seemed to have currency. However if we accept the idea of dialogue as interactions between others, to create a new understanding based on the situatedness of their context in a particular historical moment, then Isaac’s (1999) definition is both pertinent and succinct – “Dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in a relationship” (p.19).

### **2.3 Important concepts**

The multi-faceted nature of dialogue has led to a number of elucidations of important concepts or characteristics of dialogue being described in the literature. For example Cissna and Anderson (1988) identify eight – immediacy of presence, emergent unanticipated consequences, recognition of strange otherness, collaborative orientation, vulnerability, mutual implication, temporal flow, genuineness and authenticity. They also point out that “dialogic scholarship is now so extensive that it is no longer possible to review it comprehensively yet briefly” (1998, p.65). Writers concur with Hammond, Anderson and Cissna (2003) who offer “this vigorous dialogue about dialogue has led to disagreement between scholars about what dialogue is and how it should be engaged” and suggests that there now exist “multiple schools of dialogue” (cited in Arnett, Bell & Fritz, 2010, p.114). They suggest however that the four main schools of

dialogue (that of Buber, Gadamer, Bakhtin and Habermas) agree on three points – that they attend to dialogue: 1) with a distinct theoretical bias or question; 2) as beginning with a meeting *with* and understanding *of* meeting and 3) recognising that dialogue cannot be demanded.

The following key concepts from within the literature should aid in an understanding of dialogue as it occurred in the Waikato International Leadership Institutes and assist in analysing the relationship of extended professional dialogues to educational leadership.

**2.3.1 *Regard:*** In the first instance dialogue should encompass a feeling of regard for one’s fellow man (Bohm, 1998; Friedman, 1975; Shields & Edwards, 2005; Starrat, 2005). In particular Shield and Edward’s (2005) understanding of dialogue is practical in that their goal is to “help educators reflect on new ways of being, both as human beings and as educational leaders; and it is deeply ethical, grounded in the need for absolute regard for the other” (p. 16). This regard can be found across the three primary dimensions that they argue are essential to dialogue; that of being, of relation and of understanding. This has links to Cissna’s concepts of genuineness and authenticity and their focus on ethics (Cissna & Anderson, 1998).

**2.3.2 *Being Present:*** Part of the regard one has for the other is found in the ability to be truly present for the other. “Being present” is an idea that stems from the work of the German speaking Buber, who said “all life is meeting”. Some authors argue that this should be translated as “all life is encounter” (Arnett et al., 2008; Friedman, 1976; Johannesen, 1971; Maranhao, 1990; McHenry, 1997). This is partly because the word ‘meeting’ has a meaning similar to ‘presentness’ when we use the German word ‘gegenwart’ – it conveys the full significance of present in the sense of an encounter with an ‘other opposite me’ (gegen). ‘Present’, thus is not a temporal concept of arrested time, but sheer present, being there in the moment of meeting. Failure of meeting Buber calls ‘*vergegnung*’. By using this word Buber refers to the possibility of people being physically present in a space but failing to meet in the sense of truly engaging with the other.

Kohanski (1975) places importance on Buber's concept that the 'other' becomes present when I have an inner awareness of him, that is, as "personal making present" (p. 170). We are truly present for each person in the dialogue when we acknowledge them and give them our regard. Senge (1990) gives an example of this by describing the way tribes in Northern Natal in South Africa greet each other. A common greeting is 'sawu bona' which he translates as 'I see you'. A common reply to this would be 'sikhona' – 'I am here'. He highlights the fact that the order is important and that until a person has been acknowledged as seen he is not present. This belief is based on a cultural belief that one exists because of the others around one – literally a person is a person because of other people (Senge, 1990). So by being present and fully aware of the other person we literally bring them into being.

**2.3.3 Suspension:** This is a key factor in the success of dialogue according to many authors, particularly those utilising dialogue in the communications field (Barge, 2002, Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 2003). The concept of suspension is explained by Schein (2003) as a way of being more reflective which is important he argues as we do not always perceive what is being expressed in a dialogue without projecting our own needs, expectations and "most of all, our culturally learned assumptions and categories of thought" (p. 33). He suggests we have two choices once we identify where we may not 'perceive' clearly – either we choose to confront the issue or to suspend, ie let the matter lie for a while to see what else will unfold. By not voicing one's reaction to something and containing our prejudice, he proposes we can get in touch with what is going on in the here and now, and become conscious of how much our thought and perception are both a function of our past learning and the immediate events that trigger it. This learning is difficult but he feels it lies at the heart of the ability to enter dialogue (Schein, 2003).

Gadamer, however, with his philosophy of textual understanding and interpretations, appears to suggest a different approach; that we should not contain our prejudices but embrace them (as cited in Wright, 2000). Rather than approaching in neutrality or extinguishing ones sense of self he argues that we need to "acknowledge our biases" and by consciously assimilating them, we are

then able to cultivate sensitivity toward what we are trying to understand and bring fresh insight to a new situation (as cited in Wright, 2000, p.106).

Suspension, for Isaacs (1999), means that after conversing (turning together) and deliberating on this communication (rather than defending one's own point of view) we need to listen without resistance and 'dis-identify' from our position so that we can explore underlying causes, rules and assumptions. When we reflect on these together we begin to participate in truly generative dialogue; that which seeks to invent unprecedented possibilities and new insights (Isaacs, 1999, p.41).

**2.3.4 *Uncertainty:*** Jaspers is quoted as saying "for the most devastating threat to truth in the world is the overwhelming claim to the absolutely true. In the certainty of the moment the humility of the question is indispensable" (cited in Gordon, 2000, p.112). In a post modern world the older quest for certainty is now viewed through a new lens of scepticism about certainty itself according to Cissna and Anderson (1998). "Change, process, appearances, surfaces, the hyperreal, spontaneity, and multiple meanings - all these now seem increasingly meaningful" (Cissna & Anderson, 1998, p. 80). To embrace uncertainty and allow ourselves to be able to question everything taking place in dialogue also enables us to suspend and reflect and opens us to new possibilities (Kedian & West-Burnham, 2010). Being uncertain entails being humble, open and aware; qualities which assist in creating a safe place for dialogue to emerge.

**2.3.5 *Encounter:*** Shields and Edwards (2005) in their book "Dialogue is not just talk" draw heavily on Burbules's work and his concept of guiding principles for successful dialogue: "participation, commitment, and reciprocity". For dialogue to build meaningful understanding within a group each individual needs to commit to the process and be available to participate for the length of time it may take. For genuine dialogue to take place members of the group need to be open to and attentive of the "other". Buber suggests that each should regard his partner as the very unique individual that they are: "I become aware of him, aware that he is different, essentially different from myself, in the definite unique way which is peculiar to him and I accept whom I thus see" (as cited in McHenry, 1997, p. 5). To be aware of others in the group is to start from a sense that self is

not the centre and to suspend our own beliefs in order to build meaning from an 'encounter' with others. "Encounter is therefore a phenomenon that occurs neither because of a choice by one partner nor out of the procedure which a group may adopt, but by virtue of a kind of awareness that is not perceptual" (McHenry, 1997, p. 5). This awareness is one that takes into account the wholeness of the other person, an awareness that "perceives the dynamic centre which stamps his every utterance, action and attitude with the recognisable sign of uniqueness" (Buber, 1965, p.78). It is possible only when we create the space for it and according to Buber this is a space where we are 'standing in relation' and provides the opportunity for creating new worlds and ways of being. A particularly picturesque image is created by his idea that when we 'encounter' other we 'come into a new country together' where we can freshly perceive the world. For true encounter to take place, Isaacs (1999) argues that "the space from which people come greatly influences their quality of insight, clarity of thought and depth of feeling. This space is composed of habits of thought and quality of attention that people bring to any interaction" (p. 30).

**2.3.6 *Spiritual essence:*** When we come to dialogue with an understanding of regard, presence and suspension we enter a relationship that almost seems to build communion between humans and crosses the boundaries of various cultures (Banchetti-Robino, 2008; Friedman, 1975; Poulos, 2008; Senge, 2008; Shields, Edwards & Sayani, 2005; Starrat, 2005). The idea that we dissolve boundaries between self and other and affirm other with a sense of high regard is suggested as a reason for the almost spiritual like energy that can be experienced in an effective dialogue (Poulos, 2008; Shields et al., 2005; Starrat, 2005). According to Buber, spirit is not a substance or a being but a relation, a 'between', which comes into being in the human act of entering into relation, in meeting (Kohanski, 1975, p. 63). Spiritual well-being is described by the New Zealand Ministry of Education as "the values and beliefs that determine the way people live, the search for meaning and purpose in life, and personal identity and self-awareness" (Fraser, 2005, p. 57). These are some of the processes we undertake when we enter into dialogue with others. "Personal identity is rooted not merely in our capacity for self-understanding but also in the nature of our developing relationship with

others in community and with the presence or absence of God” (Wright, 2000, p.107).

**2.3.7 Purpose:** Disagreement about the purpose of dialogue relates to the underlying school of thought held by those participating in dialogue. Donald Factor, who worked closely with David and Saral Bohm, was moved to point out two main areas about the experience of dialogue that he thought were integral. One of these was the fact that dialogue is not entered into for any predetermined purpose, ie to be entertained or to accomplish a task but rather it occurs because of “the interest of its participants in the unfoldment and revelation of the deeper collective meanings that may be revealed”(Factor, 2004, p. 3). He contrasts this concept of dialogue against that of one where dialogue becomes an event for which money is charged or it is used to aid an organisation with some practical outcome expected. This is an area that others have no issue with in the sense that at the outset of the dialogue the journey is unknown and the purpose has been to call together a group of people at a certain time in order to enter the dialogue (Barge, 2002; Brown, Homer & Isaacs, 2008; Heierbacher, 2007; Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 2003). The purpose is not to come to consensus or empathetic understanding of each other, not to become the same in our thinking but rather to open up new possibilities and come to fresh perspectives.

Indeed Isaacs (1993) says the purpose of dialogue is not to hide peoples’ differences but to find a way of letting them be explored ( p. 35). For him and a number of writers, the core of the theory of dialogue builds on the premise that the effect of people’s shared attention can alter the quality and level of inquiry possible at any particular time (Arnett et al., 2008; Bohm et al., 1991; Brown et al., 2008; Gordon, 2000; Isaacs, 1993; Senge, 1990; Shields & Edwards, 2005). “Dialogue’s purpose is to create a settling where conscious collective mindfulness can be maintained” (Isaacs, 1993, p. 31). Isaacs’s dialogue theory builds on the work of Kurt Lewin who noted that human association could be understood as shared fields – they claim that shared tacit thought among a group comprises a field of “meaning” and that such fields are an underlying constituent of the human experience. They suggest that dialogue permits an inquiry that “focuses people’s

attention on collective thought and shared assumptions, and the living social processes that sustain them” (Isaacs, 1993, p. 32).

Thus writers argue that dialogue focuses on getting in touch with underlying assumptions and exploring their impact on the thinking and learning taking place (Bohm et al., 1991; Freire & Shor, 1987; Gergen, 2009; Lock & Strong, 2010; McKee, 2003; Schein, 1993).

**2.3.8 Paradox:** When we enter into dialogue we encounter paradox as noted by a number of scholars (Gordon, 2000; Isaacs, 1999; Poulos, 2008; Schein, 1993; Shields & Edwards, 2005). Isaacs (1999) suggests dialogue seeks to allow greater coherence to emerge among a group of people and yet it does not seek to impose coherence. Also, that while the process encourages people to have a shared intention for inquiry, it does not necessarily have an agenda, a leader or a task. Shields and Edwards (2005) describe the paradox that “dialogue is infinitely complex but profoundly simple” ( p. 14). This is a recurring theme in the literature (McHenry, 1997; Poulos, 2008; Senge et al., 2009). To engage in dialogue one needs a modicum of trust and some degree of relationship with another person, although paradoxically, dialogue grows out of, and aids in, the development of both trust and relationships” (Shields & Edwards, 2005, p. 14).

**2.3.9 Intention:** Anton (1999) argues that “humans are fundamentally suspended in a network of intentional relations – with the notion of “intentionality” developed mainly by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (p.1). He agrees with Stewart, Heidegger, Gadamer and Bahktin that language is fundamentally constitutive of the human world and thus is intricately linked to who and *how* we are (Anton, 1999, p. 27). MacHugh (1999) expresses it as having the capability to question our consciousness and gain a perspective on our self-awareness which enables us to question the way things or ourselves are. Intentionality is seen as intrinsic to the notion of dialogue from a phenomenological perspective.

It’s importance, however, “is rooted in its concern for interpreting or making sense of lived experience, which is the ground of existential-phenomenology,

hermeneutics” (Arnett, 1981, p. 205). This thinking follows on from the work of Buber (1958), Jaspers (1951), Poulaksos (1974) and Stewart (1978) who argue that the focus of dialogue is indeed on the emergence of intersubjective meaning and the intentionality of phenomenological dialogue. Arnett (1981) argues that this is an important way to differentiate from the humanistic, psychological way of viewing dialogue, for example the way Rogers (2007) sees it, in favour of a phenomenological understanding of the “between”.

**2.3.10 Emergence:** Gordon (2000) says “Jaspers had an early grasp on what is the popular dialogical notion that completed ideas and knowledge and truths are not simply traded across individuals , but emergent through communication process” (p. 112). He argues for Jasper’s idea that what is not ‘realised’ through this process is not new meaning or knowledge. This emergent, revelatory nature of dialogue is discussed by many scholars and is the cornerstone of a Buberian perspective (Cissna & Anderson, 1998; Friedman, 1976; Gordon, 2000; McHenry, 1997; Stewart, 1991).

When we enter into a dialogue we enter into a relationship that is a reciprocally responsive one and this is what Shotter (2000) suggests leads to the emergence of new meaning. Dialogic relations encompass both the “retrospective relations of our utterances to the already existing, partially specified circumstances of their use, *and* the completely unique first time nature of their prospective relations to those circumstances” (2000, p.125). He argues that this is what makes it possible for us to then add “further inner articulation to their still only partially specified nature” (2000, p.125). Shotter calls this the third realm of dialogic relations and focuses our attention to what emerges when we are in this moment, “our utterances both work to refer to the current context of our talk (their actual content) as well as to point toward possible changes in it (their point)”(2000, p.125). Dialogical moments are important he argues because they are moments when we make a living connection to our actual surroundings “(their retrospective realist aspect)” and the moments when we create openings or invitations for the updating of these surroundings - “their prospective social constructionist aspect” (2000, p.125).

**2.3.11 Collective attention:** A number of authors agree that dialogue provides a space for a form of collective attention and learning which builds the groups' capacity for new thought and action (Bohm et al.,1991; De Turk, 2006; Fisher, 2009; Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 1993; Shields & Edwards, 2005). Arnett et al. (2008) argue that dialogue invites an 'enlarged communicative mentality' which begins with the engagement of the other:

It presupposes critical knowledge of one's own ground or position and requires a willingness to be a constant learner. Dialogue presupposes that the I is not static but ever expansive in the meeting of what is not yet normative in one's own communicative life. It is the act of meeting alterity, extreme Otherness, and in the process learning more precisely about one's own position. (p.17)

Cissna and Anderson (1998) analyse the views of Stewart in his 1991 journal article on post modern views of communication which stresses "language as a social process through which people co-constitute their worlds, abandon the construct of encoding, see human identity as emergent from interaction, and separate concerns for quality of communication from a simple check of fidelity" (p.78). In this space of collective attention Gadamer (1982) suggests that misunderstanding and prejudice become productive opportunities for communication – not failed opportunities for specifying meaning (cited in Cissna & Anderson, 1998, p. 79).

What can be gained when we utilise collective attention in dialogue is often not able to be predicted, which lends the process to be labelled messy, complex and inefficient. However Isaacs (1999) proposes that it is actually one of the key advantages; "Dialogue is a living experience of inquiry within and between people....the most important parts of any conversation are those that neither party could have imagined before starting" (p. 9). He suggests that dialogue, as Bohm conceived it, would kindle a new mode of paying attention to (as they arise) assumptions, polarisation of opinions, rules for acceptable conversation and the methods for managing differences. It is the collective that is needed to bring these matters to the surface he argues for individual reflection by its nature, looks back

at what has already taken place and is innately limited for anticipating assumptions, opinions, rules and differences that are only now emerging.

## **2.4 Impact for leadership and learning**

The literature suggests there are a number of areas where the experience of dialogue has an impact on aspects of leadership and learning. Those that are common to a number of theorists are considered below.

### **2.4.1 Change Leadership**

In order to succeed in the process of building leadership in a learning community, relationships and communication are seen as key aspects with some authors promoting dialogue as integral to the process (Bohm et al., 1991; Fisher, 2009; Isaacs, 1999; Shields & Edwards, 2005). West-Burnham (1997) proposes that leading is concerned with vision, strategic issues, transformations, ends, people and doing the right things. Leadership teams therefore need to ‘be concerned with values, direction, the long term and crucially, enabling others to fulfil the central purpose of the school’ (West-Burnham, 1997, p. 117). He also warns of the danger of thinking there will be periods when it will not be necessary to change. If change becomes a topic or product rather than the central abiding process then he suggests that ‘it is virtually impossible to create a culture of continuous improvement’ (1997, p. 117). What is needed is a process that is sustainable, generative and one that aligns itself to dealing with the emerging future.

Continuous improvement needs an underlying strategic process to drive it. Due to the very nature of human organisations and the rapid pace with which society is changing we need to analyse carefully how best to implement that strategy in order to sustain the process. “A sense of direction is important but a rigid blueprint of the future is often counterproductive” (Brooke-Smith, 2003, p. 105). He argues that vision and mission cannot be mandated or imposed – they must grow and be nurtured. One of the most important features of a learning organisation that allows this to happen is the quality and quantity of interactions

between members of the community. Dialogue calls for participants to focus on just that; their interactions and relationships with each other.

Spillane and colleagues describe leaders as agents of change and offer the idea that “leadership occurs when one person modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group. Leadership thus is defined as a relationship of social influence” (Spillane, 2006, p. 10). Dialogue is useful for this type of leadership because it focuses on the interaction between two or more members of a group. The group is involved in a structuring and a restructuring of their situation and the dialogic process includes the perceptions and expectations of the members. This collective interaction of dialogue appears to allow therefore a modification in motivation and competency not only of the individual but also of the group. Interactions are the key to unlocking leadership practice from a distributed perspective because “leaders can interact in the co-performance of leadership routines even when they seek different or conflicting outcomes. Working together on a leadership routine does not necessarily mean working toward similar goals” (Spillane, 2006, p.84).

Schein (2003) asks the question; why is dialogue essential in leadership? He addresses his own question by talking about the need for rapid learning to cope with the increasing rate of change. He argues that the ultimate reason for learning about the theory and practice of dialogue is “that it facilitates and creates new possibilities for valid communication. If we did not need to communicate in groups, then we would not need to work on dialogue” (2003, p.28). In a world where problem solving and conflict resolution in groups is becoming increasingly important, a deep understanding of dialogue and its associated skills is argued by some to be necessary. (Frey, 2000; Keller, 1979; McKeon, 2000; Schein, 2003, Shields & Edwards, 2005).

#### **2.4.2 Collaborative learning**

Building a learning community is enhanced by the process of dialogue from the perspective that it makes explicit sub cultures and underlying assumptions. Fullan

(2000) suggests that “creating collaborative work cultures is incredibly complex” (p. 116). However dialogue assists in this area. It develops a collaborative culture which assists in organisational effectiveness and promotes both individual and collaborative learning (Freire & Shor, 1987; Schein, 1993; Senge, 2005).

Numerous theorists declare *how* we talk together definitively determines our effectiveness in learning together (Barge 2002; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Lock & Strong, 2010; Senge, 2005). Also how we listen to others is a key for dialogue (Buber, 1957; Schein, 1993; Shotter, 2000). “We need to learn to listen with a great deal more humility” (Isaacs, 1999, p.94). Utilising these skills in dialogue to harness the collective intelligence of the people around us gives us a greater understanding than we would otherwise have on our own and leads us to seeing our way more clearly. It also helps us understand ourselves and our own motives. Isaacs (1999) words it in this way:

And as a leadership method, the dialogue approach differs from other methods because you must develop it within yourself, and model it for others, before you seek to apply it to the teams you lead or the problems you face. In this sense dialogue invites you into greater balance as a leader. (p.11)

Shields and Edwards (2005) propose a change in the system’s leadership style from managerial to dialogic (p. 63). They speculate that leaders would no longer be overwhelmed by change and would indeed develop a different perspective on educational leadership by adopting a more humanistic and dialogic approach. This perspective would be effective for student learning and enhance the opportunity for student voice to be heard. Sergiovanni (1998) explains that in communities, leadership and learning go together and this is true of leadership and sense-making. He says “leaders and followers reflect together, learn together and inquire together as they care together to construct a reality that helps them to navigate through a complex world” (1998, p. 42). Utilising dialogue would truly allow this to happen in a school. For as Shields, Edwards and Sayani (2005) so aptly describe it:

Education relies largely on human interaction that places one immediately in a moral space in which we both give the gift of ourselves – our presence, our attention and our regard – to another and in which we also

receive the gift of presence, attention, and regard directed toward ourself.  
(p. 5)

Communities of learning build on this type of interaction and the advantage of dialogue is that it is grounded in a collective and collaborative communication process whereby people construct new knowledge and uncover meaning together by noticing their individual and collective assumptions and predispositions (Barge, 2000; Isaacs, 1991; Lock & Strong, 2010; Schein, 1993; Senge, 2009; Wright, 2000).

### **2.4.3 Embracing diversity**

One of the key arguments for dialogic learning is that it embraces diversity and difference in this social constructionist era (Anderson, Baxter & Cissna, 2004; Arnett, Bell & Fritz, 2010; De Turk, 2006). These writers find there is a shift in thinking when groups utilise dialogue that leads group members to explore others' assumptions. The goal of learning more deeply about those assumptions helps grow and develop mutual understanding and co-realised meaning. By focusing on the prejudices and biases that we bring to our learning environment and interactions with 'other', or rather "excavating our frames of mind" as McKee (2003) puts it, we find one of the keys to collaboration and dialogue. The very act of exploring others' assumptions opens up inquiry that is non-confrontational and allows a reflection on the rules that govern how we operate. This phenomenon becomes the stimulus for generative thinking; as people explore their conceptual influences and prejudices their mental framework expands and they are able to use their new understanding to look at ideas with a fresh perspective.

### **2.4.4 Focusing on reflection and relationships**

Those who have tried teaching with dialogue in the classroom suggest that it can support a transformative learning experience which helps learners become more reflective (Gunnlaugson & Moore, 2009; Schein, 2004). Fink (2005) working

with his colleague Louis Stoll developed a list of things a teacher should be engaged in that correspond with concepts of dialogue. These include: recognising (themselves, their mental models, their current reality); reflecting; relating (collaborating with networks of colleagues, providing moral and professional support); and risktaking (Fink, 2005). Exploring consequences of group communication in the classroom, Allen and Plax (2002) suggest that dialectical aspects can lead to increased sense of belonging and involvement as well as developing creativity and the courage to take risks in communication (p.227). The impact of dialogue then seems to be an increased ability to use reflection to develop learning and relationships (Arnett, 1992; Barge, 2002; Schein, 1993; Senge; 1990). Explaining their idea of dialogue as an enlarged communicative mentality, Arnett et al. (2008) reinforce the idea that “dialogue suggests that the emergent meaning in discourse does not belong to either communicative partner; it is the product of the relationship” (p.3). Some authors suggest that a school-wide dialogue process develops citizenship skills and enhances school climate (Pearce & Pearce, 2001). Others argue that it assists in helping overcome the “fragmentation” that exists in the education process so that the collective capacity to learn is enhanced (Isaacs, 1993; Kofman & Senge, 1993; O’Neill, 1995). Indeed Isaacs (1999) suggests that it is through the collective reflection of a group that we reach what he calls the ‘generative dialogue space’ where the group experiences greater interpersonal connection and generates new rules of interaction that allow new possibilities to come into existence.

#### **2.4.5 Power Differentials**

Dialogue from a Buberian viewpoint assumes members of the dialogue have an equal relationship. In education this assumption cannot necessarily be maintained. However the process of dialogue helps encourage all participants to speak by addressing the *power differentials* explicitly. The exposing of the inequities inherent within these relationships is where the transformative potential lies (Geelan, Gilmer, & Martin, 2006). Human dignity and civil relations are protected by the process of dialogue and some go as far as to suggest it helps make

education a spiritual enterprise (Factor, 2004; Fraser, 2005; Poulos, 2008; Shields et al., 2005; Starrat, 2005; Vertrees, 2004; Wright, 2008).

Isaacs (1999) puts it clearly:

Dialogue has promise in education because it challenges traditional, hierarchical models and proposes a method for sustaining ‘partnership’ – between teachers and staff, teachers and students, and students with each other. Dialogue can empower people to learn with and from each other. (p.12)

#### **2.4.6 Practical applications**

While the literature fails to give many practical examples of dialogue for educational leadership, a number of practical examples are offered for the business world. Pan and Howard (2010) suggest that distributing leadership and cultivating dialogue offered a positive example of the usefulness of dialogue in leadership activity. Their study showed that the “inclusive process of identifying the individual and developing the community caused a significant culture change” (p.495). They found that their department became focused “toward collaborative knowledge creation, problem solving and decision-making using the collective evidence of the team” (p.495).

Pollock (2009) suggests it is worth spending energy on dialogue and that even though managers may feel that it is difficult to maintain a continuing dialogue because of time constraints and work pressure, it is worth encouraging departmental dialogue and though the results may not be immediate, eventually increased rapport and even efficiency may result. “Quantum Edge” utilise dialogue in their consultative business that helps leadership teams through executive coaching and team building. Two of their facilitators link dialogue to the physical by utilising Aikido (the martial art of harmony) as a metaphor for the process (Moon & Thorsen, 2010). They suggest that this enables positive outcomes in conflict resolution and establishing a high degree of cohesiveness in teams. They feel that leadership of change in organizations requires exceptional communications and so they help leadership teams develop crucial skills such as

dialogue (Moon & Thorsen, 2010). Isaacs (1999) agrees that aikido seems particularly well suited to dialogue because it invites practitioners to become aware of and blend with the energies of 'another'. From an Afro-centric perspective on leadership, Bolden and Kirk (2009) propose development activities that promote relational, critical and constructionist perspectives with an emphasis on dialogue and sharing experience to enhance participants sense of 'self in community', generate shared understandings, challenge repressive power relations, and develop culturally appropriate forms of leadership behaviour ( p. 69).

Practical examples in the literature that do relate to education however, are suggested by Deal and Peterson (2009). Their idea is that "the openness and authenticity of dialogue creates connections and breaks down barriers" and that successful cultures try to find ways to increase: *convening* – bringing staff and students together with community members, *conveying* – multiple ways of communicating, *collaborating* – including parents in decision making and implementation of new ideas, *conspiring* and *co-creating* – using creative juices of parents and community organisations to gain resources and produce shows, develop arts, improve school's appearance etc and *celebrating* (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 186). Arguably, dialogue would help build the culture of respect and climate of trust that Deal and Peterson suggest are an essential requirement of successful schools. Some further examples of dialogue utilised in education are offered by Shields and Edwards (2005) however in general it does appear that the literature fails to link dialogue to practical applications within the field of education.

#### **2.4.7 Dialogue and educational leadership in New Zealand**

New Zealand has absorbed a number of educational leadership traditions and theoretical perspectives from the USA and Europe but there is growing recognition of the impact of the Maori and Asian perspective as well as the evolving New Zealand identity in this particular historical moment. According to one New Zealand writer, Lashway (2000), principals need to articulate a clear

organisational vision and foster acceptance of group goals, ie covenants which grow out of shared values (p.34). He quotes Sergiovanni, saying such covenants are developed through continual dialogue that explicitly considers values, beliefs and behaviours that unite the school community. Thus dialogue both develops and sustains the school's vision. It also enhances the idea that school leaders should provide appropriate models and provide intellectual stimulation, as well as nurturing a strong school culture that supports and exemplifies the guiding values (Lashway, 2000).

Codd (2004) argues neoliberalism has exacerbated the erosion of trust in New Zealand schools and West-Burnham (2003) argues the focus of schooling has become dangerously narrow. He fears that there is a danger that 'success' in schooling has marginalised a broader concept of education. There is a call to provide an educational setting in which "people can allow a free flow of meaning and vigorous exploration of the collective background of their thought, their personal predispositions, the nature of their shared attention, and the rigid features of their individual and collective assumptions" (Isaacs, 1993, p. 25).

While fresh conversations are opening up in relation to dialogue and its impact on diversity and power differentials and social justice (Anderson & Cissna, 2008; Arnett et al., 2008 ; De Turk, 2006; Smith, 2008) not a lot of investigation has taken place on the utilisation of dialogue in schools. This study seeks to respond to Anderson and Cissna's (2008) call for fresh perspectives from outside "well known academic European and North American traditions" and in particular focus on the influence of dialogue on educational leadership and professional learning in New Zealand. In terms of the effects of intergroup dialogue, Hurtado (2001) notes that 'despite a firm grounding in theory and research-based principles, actual research in intergroup dialogue is still in its infancy' (p. 27). De Turk (2006) suggests there are important exceptions however, including those of Vasques & Scalera (1999), Zu'niga & Sevig (1997), and Geranios (1997), which found evidence for the following individual participant outcomes: "increased awareness about self, individual differences, group identities, and societal discrimination; stereotype reduction; increased comfort with intergroup interaction; skill development in complex thinking, perspective taking,

communication, and conflict resolution; and long-term commitments to work toward social justice” (p.34).

Another area that dialogue appears to impact on and needs further research in New Zealand is conflict resolution. Dr. Paul Keller was the father of the conflict resolution element of Manchester College’s Peace Studies Program. He was a much sought-after expert in conflict resolution and interpersonal communication. He co-authored one of the first books on interpersonal communication, "Monologue to dialogue: An exploration of interpersonal communication" (1979). He believed that dialogue aids conflict resolution but that the process calls on individuals to take risks to achieve this: when utilising monologue the risk-taking involves deep trust of the self, but little risk with others. It is when we risk full involvement with another that we enter into dialogue with that person he argued (1979). It would be useful to discover if people did find dialogue a process that was useful for conflict resolution. Also whether they felt risk taking was involved.

Finally Arnett et al. (2008) suggest that in recent scholarly articles we continue to see support for the ethical and the practical within dialogue scholarship. Additionally, issues of alterity, power, and justice begin to inform how dialogue theorists explore the philosophies of individual and group communicative practices. This study seeks to confirm whether practical and ethical responses to extended dialogue took place for educational leaders in New Zealand.

My research would seek to analyse whether dialogue had been useful to people who had experienced it and whether in fact they would (by better comprehending the concept) “develop new educative relationships” and “deepen understanding, which, in turn, may lay the groundwork for changing schools in ways that will enhance social justice” (Shields & Edwards, 2005, p. 3). It is in the area of educational leadership that we need to investigate the practical role of dialogue – it is clearly being researched in the business arena but as previously mentioned there appears to be a dearth of articles focusing on how dialogue impacted on educational leadership. Kosminsky & Kosminsky (2003) used written dialogue pages to increase motivation in learning with their students and De Turk (2006) used dialogue (as we did in the ILI) to focus on certain issues such as identity and

racial misunderstanding. She noted also that the long-term effect of dialogue on participants is difficult to assess but my research would go some way to asking about this effect on the individual. As with her research this study would privilege “individual-level consciousness and change rather than intersubjectivity or any community level impact of dialogue” (2006, p.48).

## **CHAPTER THREE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

It is generally understood that research seeks to add to our knowledge of the world. However the nature of research is complex and we need to address what is meant by knowledge and to place the idea of research inquiry into a context in order to more readily understand the process. Educational research in particular, is an area of research that has recently been experiencing “an explosion of new methodologies and approaches to inquiry” (Anderson & Arsenault, 2004, p.6). We need to understand how these underlying philosophies or theoretical positions determine the nature of the research method. We also need to understand how we gather and make sense of data in the educational world in order to add to the body of knowledge humankind has thus far co-constructed. How do we do this in a democratic and principled fashion maintaining the dignity of all concerned? How do we ensure that the research is appropriately conducted, reliable and of a quality that will withstand peer review?

### **3.2 Research as creating new knowledge**

In the Western world until the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century all major Western epistemologies or theories of knowledge were foundationalist. They tended to follow two separate types of reasoning based on either a rationalist point of view such as Des Carte’s “I think therefore I am” philosophy or the more empiricist reasoning which states that all knowledge derives from “experience” that was promoted by Englishman John Locke (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). This way of knowing placed research in a scientific or positivist context. However, the social sciences also make use of another context; that of knowledge as a ‘social construction’. Within the first context there is usually a determinist belief that suggests events have causes which are determined by other circumstances and that we are able to uncover the

links between the two to make sense of the world. Thus by observing and verifying direct experience we can classify and quantify the world and explain it in as simple a way as possible. It then becomes possible to generalise about the nature of phenomena and build up a body of knowledge that can generate theory and provide applications that presumably better the world for human kind. The second context contrasts markedly this way of viewing the world. It seeks to include notions of choice, moral responsibility and individuality and does not hold the belief “that human behaviour is governed by general, universal laws and characterised by underlying regularities” (Cohen, Manion & Morrision, 2007, p. 19). Thus when undertaking social science research within this ‘social constructionist’ paradigm, the researcher seeks to explore how individuals or group members give meaning to their experiences through the eyes of different participants in their own specific, contextualised world. In their attempt to construct knowledge about the subjective world of human experience they analyse data from which theory emerges as opposed to rationalising a general theory as would be the case in the positivist model.

Basically these two paradigms look at the world in different ways – the positivist lens looking for causes in an objective, measuring, predicting way in order to verify or construct rules of behaviour and the social constructionist paradigm in terms of the actors in the world and how they relate to and interpret phenomena and socially construct new knowledge through negotiation.

### **3.3 Current paradigms in educational research**

Guba and Lincoln (2000, p. 22) describe a paradigm being “a net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological and methodological premises” or a framework which guides their behaviour. If we look at the two main meta paradigms (positivist and social construction of reality), Toma (2006) states that social constructionists "operate in a more transactional way, connecting directly with their participants – not discovering findings from them but rather negotiating

with them to create findings” (p. 409). The ontology of the social constructionist can be described as relativist in that they believe realities are apprehended in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions that are contextually located and shared among groups who hold similar constructs and thus knowledge can only be created by negotiation of our constructed understandings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). We cannot know something directly. Positivist researchers believe that reality is ‘out there’ and it can be observed, measured and known with discoverable universal truths and generalisable laws. Thus the use of hypotheses to develop and test general theories, and methods which involve the manipulation and measurement of individual variables is common (Phillips & Burbules, 2000).

In some research both paradigms have a place (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). An example is an ongoing study within the University of Waikato Pathways College that seeks to interview staff members about their use of “interactive whiteboards” and makes interpretive analysis of these interviews. At the same time the research project utilizes quantitative data obtained by surveys and analyses these statistically in order to back up/cross-check some of the interview findings. Indeed Kerwin, Vialle, Herrington and Okely (2006) suggest that mixed methods can be used to confirm the findings of other approaches or to act as a starting point for another approach. They also suggest that they could be used to complement each other and that neither should be thought of as superior to the other (2006, p38). We may be encouraged by Gorard & Taylor (2004) who argue “it is increasingly okay for us to act in a way that Rossman and Wilson (1991) approve of as ‘shamelessly eclectic’ in our use of methods” (p. 175).

In contemporary educational research the “social constructionist paradigm” is seen by some as a meta-paradigm label that can encompass the burgeoning number of methodologies being utilised such as ethnomethodology, phenomenology and symbolic interaction (Burton & Bartlett, 2009; Dressman, 2008; Johnson & Christensen, 2006; Walford, 2001). Under this umbrella, and while acknowledging the debate over paradigm shift (Donmoyer, 2006), we are able to accommodate further paradigms that have emerged that are important to educational research.

One such paradigm is closely linked to critical theory and takes this name. Through this lens, the researcher views the world with a deliberately political agenda which is transformative in nature. The researcher is seeking to question and examine behaviour in the world in order “to bring about a more just, egalitarian society in which individual and collective freedoms are practised and to eradicate the exercise and effects of illegitimate power” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 27). The methodology particularly associated with this paradigm is that of ideology critique and action research. “The notion of ideology critique engages the early writings of Habermas,” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 31). It asks *what* knowledge, and *whose* is important in curriculum and decision making and in particular focuses on whose interests such knowledge serves; highlighting the concept that knowledge is not neutral.

Current research practices in education and the social sciences are confronted with even larger cultural issues as Lock and Strong (2010) point out; “where are women and minority culture people represented in the so called universal knowledge of ‘man’?” They argue that the very foundations of what seemed a secure knowledge base have been under assault in recent times (2010, p.1). One such area of research that does this (which is closely linked to ideology critique) is that of feminist research. Here “woman’s consciousness of oppression, exploitation and disempowerment becomes a focus for research” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 35). It also questions the exploitative nature of research in general where the researcher is seen to benefit from the research and the participants typically remain disenfranchised and powerless. “Feminism argues the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness, skills, and institutions, as well as in the distribution of power and privilege” (Lather, 1992, p. 91). Within the New Zealand context, the multiple directions in research that feminist theory has opened up have helped address “the failure of critical theory to deliver emancipation for oppressed groups” (Smith, 1992, p. 165). She argues that Black Feminist thinking intersects with the Maori attitudes of research and “have been useful for Maori women in legitimating, with literature, what Maori women have experienced” (1992, p. 168).

Research into education and dialogue by the very nature of the subject should aim to be inclusive – to include the disaffected and disenfranchised. It should aim to be holistic in its approach. Complexity theory is a further, more recent paradigm that is developing in the area of educational research that still sits comfortably under the social constructionist meta-paradigm (Gomm & Hammersly, 2001). It goes further than seeking cause and effect and linear predictions by utilising a holistic approach. This approach sees phenomena as networked and connected and looks for the dynamic interaction played out amongst the whole ecosystem (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Uncertainty and emergence are key terms associated with the research methodologies that are utilised within this paradigm. Self organisation is valued and thus this theory “argues for participatory, collaborative and multi-perspectival approaches to educational research” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 34).

In the final instance however a key concept needs to be emphasised. No matter the paradigm utilised by the researcher when undertaking their work, it is important to understand that the beliefs or theoretical positions that underlie them will be key in deciding the research methods, the research aims and inquiry as well as the criteria for validity of the research. These inquiry paradigms then are a basic set of beliefs that the researcher holds which define their understanding of the nature of reality, and how as social beings, humans come to “know” things. A match between these understandings and the methodologies used in the research will enhance the validity of the inquiry (Cohen et al., 2007; Mutch, 2005; Shenton, 2004).

### **3.4 Social constructionism and educational research design**

Social constructionism holds that rather than the “reality is out there” and “can be discovered” belief of positivism, realities are apprehended in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions that are “socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (Guba et al, 1994, p. 110).

Constructions are alterable as are their associated “realities”. Constructions are not more or less ‘true’ in any absolute sense but simply more or less informed and/or sophisticated. Inquiry from within a social constructionism world view has the investigator and the object of investigation “assumed to be interactively linked so that the ‘findings’ are literally created as the investigation proceeds” (Guba et al, 1994, p. 111).

Currently there are two main ontologies that underpin the social constructionist paradigm; one is a *realist* ontology which holds that there is a real world external to ourselves, but we can only get to know and understand this world through our constructed understanding of it. The second is the *discursive* ontology, which Harre has described succinctly by stating “the fundamental human reality is conversation” (cited in Archer, 2000, p. 97). This ontology posits the priority of language in human thought and action and that “all mentation and mental attributes are derivative from conversation and that our private mental activities are parasitic on public discourses” (Archer, 2000, p.97). It holds that “utterances interpreted as speech acts become the primary entities in which minds become personalised, as privatised discourses” (Harre & Gillet, 1994). This understanding of reality suggests that new knowledge is talked into being both in our community and within our own self.

As well as the focus on discourse, social constructionist thinking encompasses the idea that “what we take to be the world importantly depends on how we approach it and how we approach it depends on the social relationships of which we are a part” (Gergen, 2009, p.2). It highlights the idea that together we construct our worlds and that as we speak together we can bring new worlds into being. For Gergen this means that “standing before us is a vast spectrum of possibility, an endless invitation to innovation” (2009, p.5). For Gadamer -scholar Georgia Warnke, it means that individuals who operate within their own historical horizon of understanding are opened to the possibility of “an endlessly articulated and shifting universe of horizons and that to try and fix this universe in a final, immutable form or hierarchy is to miss the point” (cited in Lock & Strong, 2010, p.67).

As Lock and Strong suggest “language and ways of speaking that enable speakers to stay familiar or appropriated with each other can also bind them to static ways of relating to their changing circumstances” (2010, p 270). In an extended dialogue the way of representing and talking about reality is negotiated within the group, as they work out how to “go along” with each other. Lock and Strong suggest the process calls us to “become aware of the link between our taken-for-granted ways of talking and how they shape our thinking” (2010, p 275). It can help us examine how language serves power relations. It can help us unpack the value laden basis of discourse and the dominant discursive practises within a group. This is important if we believe that, as Lock and Strong (2010) suggest, reality is not already categorised by God or nature but rather constituted through the social process of people talking about it, writing about it and interacting with each other – socially constructing it. We need to be attentive to the ways in which we speak to each other – “For the constructionist, words are themselves a form of social practice and it is imperative that these practises not remain closeted in the house of privilege” (Gergen, 1999, p 142).

Educational research is described as a social science and as such entails a number of its own complexities. While the natural sciences are rewarded with practical applications, the social sciences “are much criticised for the slow accumulation of the knowledge base” (Lather, 1992, p.88). However such criticism fails to take into account the complexity of dealing in the social world. Human interaction is multilayered and contextual and Lather argues that we need “to produce an awareness of the complexity, historical contingency and fragility of the practises we invent to discover the truth about ourselves” (1992, p.88). When deciding what counts as evidence in educational research she urges the need to understand that while positivism is not dead it is no longer in the position to promote itself as “the one best way”(1992, p.90).

So while both positivist and social constructionist paradigms are useful in educational research inquiry as Davies (1999) argues, we need to be clear about the use of the terms qualitative and quantitative within these paradigms however.

Some authors suggest it is useful to associate these with methods and data collection (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lather, 1992), rather than with methodologies. Thus evidence from within a socially constructed world view would involve not just cause and effect but also historical, political and contextual evidence. What counts as evidence then is based on one's ontological belief.

In summary educational research involves the systematic and scholarly application of a science of behaviour to the problems of people within their social context of teaching and learning (Cohen et al., 2007). At the heart of this research lies the inquiry or research question. Fitness for purpose must be a guiding principle in deciding how to go about answering that question. All decisions about data collection, analysis, interpretation and presentation will thus be connected by the overarching research paradigms that the researcher is working within – in this case social constructionism. According to Guba and Lincoln, (1994, p.108) the research paradigm defines for the researcher what it is they are about, and what falls within and outside the limits of well reasoned research. Transparent discussion of the worldview of the researcher should inform the research which helps guide the understanding of the community who make a judgement on the truthfulness and rigour of the new learning. The decisions they make “are ongoing, demanding iterative reflection and action” (Rossman & Rallis, 2010, p. 379). The key to the process is that it is a negotiated endeavour. Purposeful, systematic, rigorous educational research can make a difference to the lives of learners by helping us come to a better understanding of what is happening in the complex world of education.

### **3.4.1 The research question**

It is integral to the research process that the researcher understands the research question to be at the heart of the research process (Cohen et al., 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study with its exploration of the influence of extended dialogue on educational leaders (taking place within the overarching social constructionist paradigm) lends itself to a true negotiation of new knowledge about the process and effect of dialogue on people and their leadership. It sits

comfortably with an ontological belief that is discursive in nature and seeks to make sense of a particular experience that is both complex and multi-layered. For “if it is in the dialogues of our relationships that we elaborate the languages and ways of interacting from which understanding and social influence become possible”, then by exploring together we socially construct new shared meaning (Lock & Strong, 2010, p. 347). Thus this research asks “What is the influence of extended professional dialogues on school leaders who experienced the International Leadership Institutes? What is the nature and extent of their learning and how does the dialogic process impact on their leadership practice?”

### **3.4.2 Research methods**

Decisions regarding how to gather information and which methods to use in this exploration were dependent on the research paradigm and also on the context of the research question. The research question came about due to the fact that I had participated in two extended dialogues organised for International educational leaders. While taking part in these I had noticed in myself a major change in thinking; not only about the process but also about the way I then interacted with people in my professional capacity as a senior teacher. In order to find out if the effect I had felt was consistent with that felt by others I needed to be able to gain an understanding of their perception of the extended dialogues and their influence. Thus research participants needed to have attended at least two dialogues for the investigation to be comparable with my experience. While surveys and/or case studies could have been used to gather data, the richness and thickness of data that I was aiming for lent itself more suitably to an interview process in which I would have an opportunity as a researcher to instantly verify or clarify participant observations and description (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

### **3.4.3 Sampling**

The quality of a piece of research can be affected greatly by the suitability of the sampling strategy. Research decisions about the sample need to be made early in

the research process and involve taking into account a number of factors such as expense and time. Cohen et al. (2007) suggest there are four key areas that need to be considered in sampling: size of sample, representativeness of the sample, access to sample and the strategy to be used. As this study was a full scope investigation of a particular issue a random sample where each member of the population had an equal chance of being selected was not suitable. The results were not going to be statistically analysed as I was looking for people who had experienced a particular phenomenon and thus I was dealing with a non-probability sample. This type of sample, where some members of the wider population will definitely be excluded ie every member does not have an equal chance of being included, is sometimes referred to as a purposive sample. As the name suggests the researcher chooses their sample because of the particular purpose of their research and the fact that no attempt to generalise is desired or intended. As the primary concern in this study was to acquire in-depth information it was suitable for a purposive sample to be employed (Cohen et al., 2007). Access issues to the sample were most likely to revolve around how busy potential sample participants were. Therefore a complete list of those people who had attended two or more ILIs was obtained and the sample was selected by applying a randomizing table to the list. The first eight names from this list were to be sent a letter of invitation to participate in the research study. If one or more of these refused for any reason another name would be chosen off the list to be sent a letter so that the required sample size would be maintained and there would not be any issues of attrition or non-response.

#### **3.4.4 Qualitative research interviews**

The interview, seen from within the perspective of qualitative educational research, is about the knowledge generated between and with human beings and is described by Cohen et al. (2007) as marking a move away from seeing humans as manipulable subjects, towards seeing them as central to the interaction that produces knowledge. It is about the exchanging of views. Thus Kvale and Brinkman (2008) suggest we should separate the word into its two meanings; *inter* and *view* (p. 2). When we interview in research terms we are allowing

participants to interpret their own understanding of the world and its phenomena and we do so in a way that allows for a renegotiation of meaning by all involved. As Walford (2001) remarks “interviewers and interviewees co-construct the interview”. It is not just merely having a chat but is in fact a social encounter that seeks to obtain accurate, rich data from which knowledge about life can be constructed. In this sense the researcher abides by certain rules hoping to avoid bias and, by questioning and direct verbal interaction, seeks to gather explicit and detailed data. The interview is concerned with finding out how a person *thinks* and *feels* and what they *know* about a particular topic or research quest.

The structure and nature of a qualitative research interview varies widely depending on what the research inquiry is; from highly structured and formal through to particularly informal so that in fact it may appear to be conversational. However all interviews, whether one-on-one or focus group interviews, seek to explore how individuals or group members give meaning to their experiences. Thus the quality of data gathered is a reflection of the relationship and understanding between the interviewer and interviewee. Burton and Bartlett (2009, p. 89) suggest because interviews can take many forms it is very important to decide how to record the data as both the researcher and the respondent need to be comfortable with whichever method is used; if the researcher decides to take notes during the interview for example then there may be a difficulty “in paying attention to the respondent”. However, if they decide to record interviews, then transcribing the recording may be time consuming. Another important factor in the interview is the type of questions asked in order to elicit responses. These will be selected on based on the nature of the research question, the literature survey, the scope of the study and the number of people involved in the research.

Structured interviews are useful where a team of interviewers will interview a large number of respondents and seek to standardise the results. A completely different scenario is a one-to-one interview where the researcher seeks to place more emphasis on the respondent’s account and may wish to ask very open-ended questions with a few prompts. Carspecken (1996) offers an interview protocol for just such a scenario. This suggests that the researcher should incorporate lead off questions for each of four or five

domains they may wish to cover, covert categories that will hopefully be covered and a set of possible follow up questions. Other researchers suggest a nondirective form of interview which has the principal feature of minimal direction and control by the researcher, allowing the participant to express feelings and thoughts as freely and as fully as possible. As an example, Moser and Kalton (cited in Cohen et al., 2007, p.356) argue that the interviewee should be allowed to talk about the subject under investigation and should “be free to guide the interview” with the interviewer just prompting and pressing for clarity and confirmation of what is being said. No matter the style of interview selected, the key for success is that the interview has been carefully designed and planned, and an appropriate schedule produced that takes into account the role of the interviewer, how the interview experience will take place, what type of analysis will be undertaken and how quality and ethical concerns will be addressed.

#### **3.4.5 Reasons for semi-structured interview**

Semi-structured interviews allow the exploration of the impact of an experience such as extended professional dialogue where the researcher is seeking to elicit information about respondents’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs and behaviour (Bouma, 2000; Kvale & Brinkman, 2008). Morrison (2006) points out that they are “variously referred to as “semi-structured”, “in-depth” or “focused” and that they “simultaneously offer the participant a chance to shape the content of the interview and the interviewer considerable latitude in pursuing a range of topics” (p.52). I made the decision to use a semi-structured interview because it was important to me that I allowed the research participants the opportunity to focus on what was important to them. It meant that they were able to describe their experiences with their own voice but it also meant I could, to a certain extent, contain the amount of data that might be generated in the interviews. While being more controllable, this type of interview was also still flexible in that the content could be organised beforehand and yet it could follow un-envisaged routes once begun. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed comparisons to be made

between interviewees because of the key topics. Themes that arose within the data were then able to be analysed.

Connelly and Clandinin suggest that one of the best ways to study human beings is “to come to grips with the storied quality of human experience”(cited in McCormack, 2004, p. 220). If my analysis seeks to tell the story of the participants’ change in behaviour, thinking and emotional response then the interview structure would perhaps be more focused on the participants’ narrative of their experience. Telling a story according to Bishop (1997) is a collaborative process and “re-presents” the outcomes of a series of reconstructions. The initial reconstruction by the participant recalling an experience is then reconstructed by the researcher as he/she transcribes and analyses the experience. A further level of reconstruction occurs as the reader reads and reacts to the experience. Knowledge constructed through this process is recognised as being situated, transient, and characterised by multiple voices, perspectives, truths and meanings. It values transformation at a personal level, individual subjectivity and the researcher’s voice (Bishop, 1997).

The very nature of the fact that the interview is a human interaction means that all the subtleties and biases and complexities of such social interaction are brought into play. Recognising and minimising bias may be an area of weakness that we need to consider in the interview as well as allowing for the impact of context, personality, experience and language.

Other disadvantages of using a semi-structured interview were minimised as far as possible in this study. Some researchers comment on the time and expense that can be involved and the fact that the ‘uniqueness’ of each interview makes collating the data more difficult (Burton & Bartlett, 2009; Cohen et al., 2007). Others are concerned about the prescription of a “neutral Interviewer” and seeing them as a recorder, not a debater and having them utilise the interviewee as a passive data producing object (Oakley cited in Bishop, 1997, p. 30). I acknowledged from the start that my interest in the topic was that I too had experienced extended dialogue and was interested in exploring how others

experienced it. By transcribing recorded interviews personally I was able to engage in a recursive fashion with the content of the interviews.

### **3.4.6 Interview analysis strategies**

Analysis of all qualitative educational research, including data from semi-structured interview, is complex because it is not usually quantitative and clear cut. In many instances researchers are working with a situated, context-bound area of inquiry that positivist researchers may suggest is not generalisable and does not build on a body of previously researched work. Larsson (2009) argues however that we can draw conclusions about other situations from a particular situation. He cites Wolcott who believes “there must be a capacity for generalisation; otherwise there would be no point in giving such careful attention to the single case”(Larsson, 2009, p. 28). Meta-analysis may also assist in providing a coordination of results from many different studies in order to make them more useful in a positivist paradigm (Cohen et al., 2007).

The analysis of a research interview involves making sense of a social encounter. It is a complex thing to do holistically and by the very nature of analysing the researcher is caught in a difficult position. How does the experience get broken down and represented without destroying the synergy of the whole? Interview data analysis is typically interpretive; either from within a social theory perspective or alternatively utilising grounded theory as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (cited in Cohen et al., 2007). The latter involves working through what has been said and experienced in the interview and theorising from that so that the researcher’s explanation or accounting makes sense of what has occurred. Griffiee (2005) suggests categories will emerge from the data and these categories are “grounded” because they reflect the data. In analysing this data the researcher does not impose personal will or preconceived ideas on the data but rather lets the data speak for itself. Harry and Sturges (2005), however, do have concerns regarding this type of analysis. These concerns centre on the time this can take – “the complexity of the data set made it impossible for us to pursue the numerous possible connections between all the data” (2005, p. 8).

Erickson offers a clear definition of what the analysis and representation of qualitative data should do for the reader: it should provide a vicarious experience of the phenomena under study, illustrate instances of key findings and analytic concepts, reveal the full range of evidence for and against the researchers findings and allow for an appraisal of the theoretical and personal grounds of the researcher's perspective, particularly as it changed through the course of the study (cited in Eisenhart, 2006). Techniques utilised to encompass these goals with the interview method are many but usually involve a descriptive narrative that makes use of summaries of what was said and done in order to reveal what has been learned. How these findings are arranged, what is taken from transcripts or videos, how the concepts are linked with interpretive commentary is naturally "filtered through the researcher's choice of what is important for readers to know" (Eisenhart, 2006, p. 570).

While an often cited advantage of the interview is that it allows for multisensory collection of data – verbal and non verbal, this does introduce a tension to the representation of the data in that usually it is a written record and the researcher may struggle with the fact that this written analysis does not perhaps show the whole story. "In looking at the words I was putting on the page, I kept thinking about everything that was not in the text – the silences, the energy, the smiles, the holding of breath" (Mallozzi, 2009, p. 1050).

One of the main issues with representing an interview is the fact that a transcription of what took place can only provide a partial representation of the interaction. Downes (2010) goes as far as to say "transcriptions are the con artists of the research world" for they stay silent about their means of production, the frustration of not quite catching a phrase, the fragmentation, the choices of what to discard or not to discard (para 20). Thus she argues they cannot be value-free nor solely technical productions. Indeed personal relations and expectations position everyone in the interview and even the motivation for the research affects what the researcher learns from the transcription and/or video recordings – "things happen in people's heads that are not recorded" (Drake, 2010, p. 85).

Keeping and using diaries and external perspectives to stimulate reflexivity wherever possible is advocated by Drake (2010). This is an important aspect of self triangulation; keeping a good record of what takes place in the social encounter of an interview. We are looking to make sense of our experience and Miles and Huber (1994) suggest that “good qualitative data are more likely to lead to serendipitous findings and new integrations: they help the researcher to get beyond initial conceptions and to generate or revise conceptual frameworks” (p.1). If we concede this then the interview can be seen as a site of professional practice, not just reflection on practice in that “interviews contain courses of questioning and methods of accounting that are reflexively part of the generation of educational knowledge” (Baker & Johnson, 1998). The use of a diary in this research was key to understanding my own responses to participant observations and aided the categorisation of key themes in particular.

### **3.5 Achieving quality in interview methodology**

So how do we draw valid meaning from qualitative data such as that obtained from an interview? Dressman (2008) suggests that in order to minimise bias and cultural imperialism, the use of social theory is important in educational research. He argues we can *validate* the research by moving from the particulars of the interview itself and the researcher’s observations “out to comparison and contrast with broader, theoretical accounts, and back to observed experience, over multiple cycles and, where and when possible across different theoretical perspectives” (2008, p. 84). There are some key concepts that need to be addressed in a discussion about achieving quality in a qualitative research and these are outlined below.

**3.5.1 Triangulation:** Bell (2005) suggests that it is very easy to fall into the bias trap, for example “selecting literature that supports triangulation and reflection on practise” (p.166). Triangulation is a navigational term which means to fix ones position from at least two known bearings, ie the researcher checks findings by using several points of reference. Miles and Huberman point out evidence may be checked in this way “by seeing or hearing multiple instances of it from

different sources, by using different methods, and by squaring the finding with others it needs to be squared with” (cited in Burton & Bartlett, 2009, p. 26). To this end, final transcripts in this research were sent back to participants to read and comment on. This was a check to ensure that the researcher’s representation of the interview matched that of the interviewee. By allowing participants to rewrite any area that did not truly reflect what they felt or had experienced, the researcher made use of Kvale’s (1996) suggestion that a dual transcriptionist/participant role helps to preserve the integrity of the final transcript for analysis.

Asking the same key questions to each interviewee allowed for comparison of perceptions from both the researcher’s point of view and those of each individual being interviewed (see appendix 1 for interview schedule). The reliability of both the transcriber and the categorisation of themes suggested by the transcripts is able to be cross checked with agreement between alternative coders and transcribers. In a postmodern world questions of validity can be addressed by continual checking, questioning, contextualising and theoretical interpretation of the findings (Cohen et al., 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Morrison, 2006). Validity refers to the truthfulness of research data and with an interview this means taking account of and disclosing how the data was gathered, whether the participants were asked if their accounts had been recorded accurately and being able to defend the interpretations of the interview experience.

**3.5.2 Trustworthiness:** Some authors suggest that “trustworthiness” becomes the main criteria for quality and that we seek honesty, transparency and richness in this qualitative inquiry (Bell, 2005; Bishop, 1997). Guba and Lincoln (1994) outline four components of trustworthiness: “credibility”, “transferability”, “dependability” and “confirmability” which could be seen as constructivist equivalents of external and internal validity, reliability and objectivity.

Gergen, however, is quoted as saying that the social constructionist is not so likely to ask about “the truth, validity, or objectivity of a given account, what predictions follow from a theory, how well a statement reflects the true intentions or emotions of a speaker, or how an utterance is made possible by cognitive processing” (Lock & Strong, 2010, p.8). Rather, for the social constructionist, samples of language

are “integers within patterns of relationship” and the chief questions that need to be asked of generalised truth claims is more focused on how they function, “in which rituals are they essential, what activities are facilitated and what impeded, who is harmed and who gains by such claims?” (Gergen as cited in Lock & Strong, 2010, p.9). This research follows Lock and Strong’s constructionist approach in that it aims to recognise “multiple possibilities for meaning and transformative action where some convention or taken-for-granted understanding or habit has held sway” (2010, p.9).

**3.5.3 Power imbalance:** In order to counteract the power and control over research issues that are imposed by the interviewing researcher some authors believe a transparent discussion of these is necessary. “To know how a researcher construes the shape of the social world and aims to give a credible account of it is to know our conversational partner” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 4). Tripp (1983) offers an attempt to objectify subjectivity through an interview research strategy “which recognises and acts upon the power relationship between the researcher and the researched” (p. 32). He suggests that it is *as* important for the researcher to find out what questions are important to the interviewee, as it is to promote their own inquiry. Bishop (1997) argues that this conjoint construction of the interview structure partly addresses the impositional power of the researcher/participant relationship. This thinking shaped my decision to describe my own ontological beliefs to interviewees at the outset of the interview in the hope that this would in some way help them understand what the interview represented to me. As mentioned earlier the semi-structured interview also allows the interviewee to reflect on what is of importance to them under the broad umbrella of the key themes. In choosing a semi-structured interview I hoped to provide a degree of equality in the participant/researcher relationship. The chance to reread the transcript and make any changes or additions also gave the participants an opportunity to highlight areas that mattered to them.

### **3.6 Respect and the Ethical researcher**

“Understanding ethics to involve trustfulness, openness, honesty, respectfulness, carefulness and constant attentiveness means that ethics is not treated as a separate part of our research – a form that is filled in for the ethics committee and forgotten” (Davies & Dodd, 2002, p. 281). It is clear that the researcher needs to build a good relationship with the research participant in order for this approach toward ethical research to be successful. While some researchers argue for empathy with the interviewee to establish rapport (Mallozzi, 2009), others point out the dilemmas of interviewing and suggest that empathy may not necessarily be a benign activity (Scheurich, 1995). It appears that the researcher walks a fine line and needs to balance rapport with having a respect for distance and difference in the interview in order to allow the voice of the interviewee to be clearly heard.

Procedural ethical issues around the interview involve informed consent, confidentiality and consequences of the interview and a number of difficult questions need to be addressed to ensure that the cost/benefit ratio of undertaking the research is not a negative ratio; who should give consent (eg participants, their superiors, parents of children) and how much information should be given and to whom, for example (Cohen et al., 2007; Finch, 2005)? However the interview is a social interaction and as such procedural ethics is just a part of the ethical concerns that need consideration. In fact some authors believe, in order to maintain beneficence and human dignity in this type of qualitative methodology, ethical principles should inform all aspects of the interview. “We posit that every decision about data collection, analysis, interpretation and presentation has moral dimensions. These decisions are ongoing, demanding iterative reflection and action” (Rossman & Rallis, 2010, p. 379).

How to care for the people in the interview process so that we describe their experience in an ethical way, when power and emotion and multiple truths are involved, is a dilemma facing the ethical researcher. For instance protecting the rights of a child in an interview (Finch, 2005; Hurley & Underwood, 2002) by clear explanations of rights, safeguards around consent and confidentiality, and the critical importance of debriefing. Another issue is that of the power disparity

in an interviewer/interviewee relationship and how to expose the operation of power and minimalise it in the interview interaction (Bishop, 1997; Cohen et al., 2007; Giorgi, 2006). One tool, suggested as a way to help cope with the complex, subtle and unpredictable nature of qualitative research such as interviews, is that of reflexivity. Not just of what is said and recorded in the interview but concerning the entire research process and the relationship between the people involved (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

In the messy, complex world of qualitative research we need to always be aware of our own biases, our own preconceptions and the impact of our research question on others. Clough (2002) puts it well:

For despite the sterility of instruments, we never come innocent to a research task, or a situation of events; rather we situate these events, not merely in institutional meanings which our profession provides, but also constitute them as expression of ourselves. (p.64)

### **3.7 Actual Research process**

In order to build a rich, context-specific picture of dialogue and the way it impacted on the educational leaders in this study, qualitative interviews were carried out from within a social constructionist paradigm. There were eight semi-structured interviews undertaken from the purposive sample of people who had done two or more extended dialogues in the International Leadership Institute. As previously explained this is a form of non-probability sampling in that the researcher is targeting a particular group in the full knowledge that it does not represent the wider population and no attempt to generalise is attempted (Cohen et al., 2007). The study sought access to 'knowledgeable people' who had in-depth knowledge about the experience. From a sample size N of approximately 320, the requirement of having attended two or more dialogues reduced the population to that of approximately 40 possible participants. A decision to utilise a sample of eight (one fifth of total available population), was made based on time constraints, type of results required (eg rich, descriptive) and style of analysis that sought to find where these experiences intersected. Of the first eight randomly chosen

names off the generated list, only one person declined to do the interview due to a heavy workload so the next person on the list was invited and was happy to participate.

Interestingly of the eight interviews, three were with females and five with males. At first there was a concern that the number of females on the generated sample list was quite low but upon discussion with some of the participants it seemed that the week away from family and workplace seemed difficult for some females to organise – two of the three spoken to were single woman and the third had strong extended family support which is why she had been able to attend. Although it would be interesting to explore this phenomenon in the future, gender of participants was not an express focus of this study and the final numbers interviewed were balanced across both genders.

The interviews were digitally recorded at locations of the participant's choice. The average interview took between 45 mins -1 hour and in all instances happened at the work place of the interviewee. These locations ranged from Auckland to Wellington on the north island of New Zealand. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher and then sent back to the individual concerned for crosschecking and additional comment. This process was assisted by the diary of the researcher notes which had been written immediately after the interviews had taken place.

The results for the main questions were collated under three broad headings that naturally arose from the research question. These were

- 1) motivations for undergoing extended dialogue
- 2) key learnings that surfaced and
- 3) ongoing impact of the process after attending two or more.

When comment was made about a topic by the majority of participants these topics were further divided into subthemes that became units for the analysis, discussion and comparison with findings in the literature that is presented in chapter five.

## **Chapter 4                      Presentation of Findings**

### **4.1      Introduction**

Exploring the impact of dialogue upon participants' emotions, thinking and leadership practice revealed the profound change that can occur when we experience dialogue together. While there are points of similarity in the narratives of the educational leaders, the personal growth that occurred for each participant was unique to the individual. In order to represent this growth and the individual's voice faithfully in this chapter, deliberate use of extensive quotation has been made. Where there was also clear commonality of experience in some key areas the responses were grouped thematically. In these instances where the majority made mention of a theme, a selection of representative quotes has been presented to highlight a new understanding. Care has been taken to respect the anonymity of participants and to consider each transcript equally. Naturally this occurred through the lens of the researcher's understanding of dialogue but every attempt was made to preserve the essence of each story while allowing the common thinking to emerge clearly.

### **4.2      Motivation for undertaking extended dialogue**

A number of key reasons surfaced as to why people undertook the dialogic process and then repeated it. Overarching themes that emerged were that it developed relationships, provided challenge for their leadership, enabled them to explore professional learning more deeply and connected them to people from very different realms with fresh perspectives on education. A number of participants held the view that the learning was 'deeper' or seemed more valuable than that they would have usually gained from a conference. The majority felt that this was due to the real sense of trust and connection they made with other people in their group and ongoing participation in the dialogic process that allowed ideas

to be challenged and for deep individual and group reflection. The motivations could be broadly described under the following subthemes.

#### **4.2.1 Developing relationships**

Dialogue as a process appeared to allow participants to forge strong relationships with other educational leaders. This was one major reason that all participants commented on when talking about their motivations for attending the dialogue more than once. Participants appreciated that the process gave them the opportunity to work alongside others in a way that developed trust and connectedness. They commented on the fact that the process allows space for emotions to be surfaced and they believed this only happened because of the trust built amongst the group.

***Participant 1:** - “you develop really high levels of trust in the people with whom you are working”*

***Participant 8:** - “we developed an incredibly strong trust so there was a lot of private things that were said that allowed members of the group to be quite emotional in what they shared”*

In fact three of the participants had decided to undergo another extended dialogue with the express purpose of developing working relationships with colleagues and enhancing their work related connections.

***Participant 4:** - “I definitely got a lot out of it and so wanted to go again...it was really about taking another group of people with me for the experience”*

***Participant 3:** - “I needed staff on board with me....and so I realised they had to go through the experience”*

***Participant 8:** - “I wanted to grow a relationship with another professional that I was working with at the time so we both went along”*

Overall, trust was clearly important in the process of developing close connections with others and received consideration from every participant. The various comments were summed up succinctly by Participant 2 who felt that people needed to trust not only others but themselves as well. This participant was also explicit about the need to trust the process and the growing relationships in order to connect with others and construct meaning together.

*Participant 2: - “I was just reflecting on....the importance of trust....to get the most out of it they have to trust themselves and they have to trust the process and they have to build a trust, a relationship with the other people in their group.”*

#### **4.2.2 Challenging one’s leadership**

A commitment to growth of their leadership ability was another motivation that was shared by all participants. They wanted to challenge their leadership thinking, perspectives and practice. Experiencing the extended dialogue provided an opportunity to explore new concepts and ways of being. One participant specifically commented on the loneliness of leadership and how dialogue was a way to remedy that and to force oneself to be exposed to new thinking. The process is seen as a way to be open to new ideas and thinking and to prevent stagnation in their leadership.

*Participant 2: - “there are a number of writers who have written about the loneliness of leadership ... if we are not careful leaders don’t have that opportunity to be in a situation where they have to interact and they are not the holder of the knowledge and nor are they working necessarily in the safe territory of their own environment and I think that is a really healthy thing to do – is to expose yourself to that sort of world where the most important thing is the response to readings or response to other people’s ideas or conversations and things like that.”*

*Participant 6: - “it provided a springboard platform for me to then look at the way leadership structures were organised”*

*Participant 7:* - “I was still looking at principal roles ...and I felt it was going to add value to the role that I had in my school as well”

*Participant 8:*- “it challenged me about my own personal circumstances of leadership in the organisation that I was part of and where I fitted with that”

*Participant 5:* - “it appealed to me and it was quite good ...because at the time I had come to a bit of a halt in what I was doing” (in a leadership role)

So returning to go through the process again and again was a way for many to keep questioning their professional role and to challenge their personal beliefs, world view and understanding of education and others. One participant explained that she had been encouraged by a colleague who had previously attended dialogues and who was excited about the thinking that happened within the process. The ‘thinking together’ (Isaacs, 1999) was an important motivation and made the challenge to their leadership non-confrontational and fascinating.

*Participant 3:* - “she said the speakers [dialogue facilitators] were of an excellent calibre and ... that the thinking might be quite forward thinking”

*Participant 5:* - “it was just the fascination of how people think”

*Participant 7:* - “both of them were very confirming for me about the core values and beliefs of what I think and act on in a school and as a leader”

#### **4.2.3 The luxury of time to reflect**

Reflection emerged as an important concept in all of the main themes of this study; it was revealed as a component of participants’ motivation to experience dialogue as well as something they gained new learning about and continued to have an impact on their leadership long after they had returned to their leadership role. The majority of participants commented that a real attraction to the ILI was

the luxury of the time to be with others and to think about leadership and educational topics. They valued the time spent in reflection and all participants saw it as an invaluable tool for their leadership.

*Participant 2:- “One of the opportunities we very rarely get is to have some time to ourselves to participate in a discussion or dialogue; um to think about your own position and to think about your learning”*

*Participant 4: - “I do think that probably for me – and whether that is just about me – the greatest value was that personal reflective side...”*

*Participant 5: - “...and yes you have got time for thinking and that is a luxury...[what stood out for me] was the reflection too – you had plenty of time to reflect on things and the discussion”*

#### **4.2.4 Professional learning and change leadership**

One use of extended dialogue that emerged as a motivation was the ongoing benefit to leadership groups as a form of professional learning. Senge is quoted as saying that schools used to be able to teach people 80 percent of what they needed to learn in their lifetime but that today the figure would be more like 2 percent. Thus “schools need to focus on thinking skills and learning skills, because those are what will prepare kids for a world of increasing interdependency and increasing change” (cited in O’Neill, 1995, p.22). The extended dialogue does just that – focus on thinking skills and learning skills, and participants appeared to recognise that they would get real change and personal growth from such a process.

*Participant 4:- “people have to be really, really challenged and shaken almost to get them out of their comfort zones – I mean being out of your comfort zone is a really, really important aspect of change. I mean you don’t really change when you are comfortable – there is no reason to, there is not motivation to. So I was*

*aware that for some people the different kind of process [of dialogue] would definitely take us out of our comfort zone and open the possibility for change”*

***Participant 8:-*** *“we had already been doing some work with dialogue in our own employment situation and it was an opportunity to look at that in terms of how it works with other people that you are not used to working with”*

Others had utilised it as professional learning because they saw it as a different style of learning that was not “academia” and that continued to promote their own leadership. Participants mentioned that the dialogue re-stimulated their interest in their own leadership practice and provided an intensely practical way to do that. Many had done years of study but still wanted to learn more without re-entering a formal academic context. One said it provided an opportunity to engage with professional learning again in a unique, positive, refreshing way.

***Participant 5:-*** *“I just didn’t want to write any more stories – it was as simple as that really. I saw this and I just wanted to ... go somewhere that was different...– it just appealed to me and I forget exactly what the blurb said but it was about having a conversation rather than being lectured”*

***Participant 1:-*** *“for personal and academic growth it is really worth doing...I found it was a powerful way to strengthen my own learning.....when I went to the first one I hadn’t really been immersed in academic stuff that much”*

***Participant 3:-*** *“I had recently finished my masters so I was interested in reading but I was [also] interested in sharing and learning from others and I think that is really important...thinking well maybe that is something that is relevant to our school”*

The process focused on exploring professional educational understandings and modelled a way to do this that was not purely academic but that promoted inclusivity and equality. People did not feel that they ‘didn’t know’ what they ought to, nor did they feel unable to engage in the process through a perceived

lack of knowledge. Reportedly for some participants it was more effective in their current context than a more formal academic study.

**Participant 5:** - *“I sometimes think there is not enough of that sort of thing – you see we are geared for academia and we are geared for masters degrees and doctorates and all that sort of thing but I think I was able to really, really work in an intellectual conversation where I didn’t have to pass a test or be told I was right or wrong”*

#### **4.2.5 Profound learning**

Most participants said that a key motivation for repeated attendance to the dialogues was in fact to deepen understanding of educational leadership. They commented that the process allowed profound learning to take place. Specific factors that contributed were the trust that developed, the emotions expressed and the fact that content and process were discussed alongside each other. This quest for a more profound learning was also highlighted later when asked about key learnings they took from the dialogue sessions.

**Participant 6:** - *“...and made it very exciting in the fact that we were talking about different elements of professional pedagogy including such things as gaining understanding of the difference between dialogue and just conversation ... so learning to move through that nexus that West-Burnham spoke about where you move from shallow through deep to profound in several different contexts – such as the context of understanding of what leadership is all about. So you know my understandings were at a certain point and my understandings developed during the institute and – it was insightful for me to be a part of that because it was a process and I got a lot from it personally.”*

**Participant 4:**- *“I had a kind of epiphany experience”*

**Participant 3:-** *“the ideas that were put forward were innovative and the discussion groups around the tables...really brought out where people’s thinking was and there was a huge range in where people’s thinking was (smile)”*

**Participant 8:-** *“I was... reacting to that and to their profound learning that was coming out.”*

No matter the reason for the first experience of dialogue, repeated attendance occurred because of an interest in the process and the type of learning obtained. One noted that the learning community that developed was one that they could continue to take part in after the ILI ended as well. Another noted that the diversity of thinking that surfaced provided fresh perspectives and deeper conversations. This diversity appeared to occur because of the international aspect of the dialogues – each participant bringing their own culture as well as an interdisciplinary perspective to the table.

**Participant 1:-** *“It was the topic that first attracted me so I didn’t know a lot about the dialogic process at that point but having been involved in it – it was certainly a process that I enjoyed”*

**Participant 7:-** *“ Okay I went to the first one because I was able to do it as a paper towards my masters in educational leadership – but what I liked very much was sitting around a table that you got to know the people within a week very, very well. It was obviously about leadership and building community and we were actually living that for that week which I really enjoyed and with an international perspective not just NZers. Also what I found very refreshing was that it wasn’t just a group of teachers. They were from all walks of life; whether they were from the Ministry, whether they were from the national library, overseas lecturers, you know - um very much an equal platform but we all had value that we could bring to the table. But it was very, very enjoyable and I would highly recommend it because it made so much sense.”*

**Participant 4:-** *“one of the reasons was because I was really interested in what he [John West-Burnham] had to say ...and I was quite interested to talk to him a little*

*about some particular findings of mine...in the hope that it would throw a little bit of light on some of the things I was pondering in my thesis”*

**Participant 3:** -*“The work that Jan Robertson was doing at the time in the Waikato (before she left for London) around coaching and mentoring was quite a new concept at the time and I found that fascinating...very practical”*

## **Summary**

Motivations for educational leaders to participate in more than one extended dialogue were varied but common threads became apparent. Their experience was that dialogic process was a powerful way to strengthen their own: relationships, leadership development, interdisciplinary understandings, professional connections, and new learning.

The learning space or field or ‘container’ (Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 2003) provided by dialogue allowed for an equity amongst participants. This allowed them move ‘into relation with others’; to get to know people extremely well so that a safe, trusting space developed (Buber, 1965). Within this space participants said they were quickly able to develop deep connections and relationships with others which in turn helped them explore their own understandings of leadership. This ‘interpersonal fellowship’ (Bohm & Nichol, 2003) allowed emotions to surface and questions were able to be asked that challenged their thinking. Leaders were open to this challenge and were motivated to develop both personally and professionally through their experience of dialogue.

### **4.3 Key understandings that surfaced about dialogue**

Having identified the core motivations for experiencing extended dialogue participants were then asked to describe key learnings that they felt they had taken from the process. Naturally a diverse selection was recorded reflecting the various

interests of the sample. However the learning could be categorised into two main areas; those that centred on the process of dialogue and those that pertained to profound learning in other areas such as education, leadership and interpersonal relations. For the purposes of this study their thinking about dialogic process was important and is presented first, followed by their understandings that the majority shared and commented on.

#### **4.3.1 Being comfortable with the dialogic process**

A key to challenging their thinking and exploring their professional learning successfully was the idea of becoming comfortable with the dialogic process. Writers such as Shields (2004) suggest that this explicit teaching of process offers everyone the chance to participate and as such is a democratic form of education.

*Participant 1: - “So the second thing that we learnt and it was really emphasised at both ILIs was understanding what a dialogue is and how it works – and the process of dialogue and the difference between that and a discussion and that and a debate ... as opposed to actually developing a shared understanding in an area”*

*Participant 8: - “...part of that was that I was reasonably proficient, for want of a better word, comfortable with the dialogic process” [explaining why the process was not a frustrating experience]*

Understanding the process made people feel they could then participate and had something to offer; one participant went as far as to say the process was ‘user friendly’. It is a process that allows for all levels of participant understanding and works for all in that it is inclusive and deliberately seeks the view of all participants. What they knew about dialogue before they entered into it was not something that people were judged on.

*Participant 5: - “Oh yes and it was so user friendly – it was not daunting. You see I don’t actually think of myself as an academic ...”*

*Participant 7: - “[the process allows] a win/win situation where there is no loser....we all had value that we could bring to the table”*

#### **4.3.2 Trust and the right to be heard**

The dialogic process was one that engendered trust and all participants commented on this. In particular there was a clear belief that opinions could be revealed safely and that everyone would have a chance to take part and be included.

*Participant 1: - “people get really confident knowing that they are actually going to be heard and acknowledged and their understandings are valid understandings, and no less valid than anybody else’s”*

*Participant 3: - “I got over a feeling I suppose of being super protective of my patch and it became much more an open ‘our’ feeling where inclusiveness reigned”*

*Participant 2: - “it took about three days for that trust to build enough.....the barriers were up (at first) because they were safety barriers more than any other thing”*

Participants understood that the process allowed all voices to be heard and this meant people also had a chance to ask for clarification without fear. Over the week they moved to a place where they trusted each other enough to listen carefully to very different viewpoints.

*Participant 6: - “they had to listen to the way in which people’s ideas were cutting through their own ideas or aligning with their own and maybe even supporting it”*

*Participant 8: - “those were the deliberate acts of making sure everyone had an equal say in the process”*

### **4.3.3 Suspension and surfacing of assumption**

Within the dialogic process the idea of ‘suspension’ was a key learning for many. Participants were training themselves to take a step back from making judgements; to hear comments without reacting immediately. They became aware that there was a space created by dialogue where people were able to say things that could just sit between them without needing an instant comment. This also included being able to express how they felt about a topic, their emotional response as well as giving an opinion or perspective. Indeed what distinguished dialogue from other forms of communication such as discussion or problem solving, was the surfacing of feelings and assumptions which helped them to greater understanding.

*Participant 5:* - “Yes and I didn’t like what some people were saying and I think that was the challenge of not accepting it but accepting it into my head and maybe after a while you thought o yeah...”

*Participant 1:* - “One of the key things of my understandings of dialogue is that it is a sharing of perspectives and you don’t necessarily always have to agree with other perspectives so I think strengthening that understanding was really useful for me.”

### **4.3.4 Openness to process and multiple viewpoints**

Some participants really appreciated not having a defined goal or being lectured to but having a process that allowed the group to develop their *own* shared understanding. Multiple viewpoints were aired and the main role of a facilitator became one of a more participatory role in the quest for new knowledge.

*Participant 2:-* “...if you go to a situation like that you are actually putting yourself in a position where there is no clearly identified endpoint and you may meander around and go by various routes to get there um and so I think that is

*one of the strengths of that – it's a change from doing a university paper where you have got to meet certain criteria and write about certain things to pass or even in the job to read an article and then you are going to share it with the staff or whatever it might be. Whereas in this case there is no clear pattern and to understand that the facilitators role is quite brief in a sense of their input to the whole group but to individuals and to parts of the group it is quite different.”*

For six of the participants another important understanding was that there needs to be an open-mindedness that is brought to the process for it to be effective, as well as a ‘preparedness’ to put yourself in a vulnerable position – one where you do not have the answer or know how you will get it.

***Participant 2:** - “I didn’t despair about it and I think there are some people who go and they do despair and they do give up because they think it is a course where somebody gives you an answer ...um and then you have got a product where you can go back to your school or to your work environment and say “right here is the plan ... or here’s the plan according to whoever” and you know it’s a ready-made answer. Whereas it’s a much more challenging thing – dialogue is a much more challenging process.”*

#### **4.3.5 Reflexive practice**

One main understanding that surfaced for more than half of the participants was that the process strengthened their ability to take part in a reflective process that was also reflexive. They were examining their own actions and in doing this they affected their own behaviour. In fact participants noted with interest that in the process they were learning in a group but developing their own understandings and reflecting on their learning at the same time.

***Participant 2:** - “I think that to me it was really good to realise that um you didn’t have to finish a session of an hour and a half or two hours or a day or whatever it was and have everything packaged and wrapped up and have everyone say we all understand and we are all going forward from here. You*

*know and I think that challenging of your views and that time for reflection and all of that... because we all talk about leaders needing to be reflective practitioners but they often don't allow themselves time to reflect nor do they expose themselves to other ideas that are going to challenge their own..."*

**Participant 1:** - *"if all they want is an answer or a formula to fix their school. It doesn't really provide that and that was never the intention I don't think - it asks people to ask more questions about their own practise as a reflective model I think."*

#### **4.3.6 Paradox**

The idea of paradox underlay many views that participants offered about the process of dialogue. For example one said that what could be quite frustrating about the process, also often provided the greatest learning.

**Participant 4:** - *"That is interesting then perhaps the slowness of the process which I found frustrating -I mean I mull over stuff – I say I am not a quick thinker but I quickly pick up what resonates but I can't say stuff often very quickly – it takes me some time before I can talk about it but perhaps it was the slowness of the process that allowed the time for my own reflection so that it didn't actually particularly matter if I didn't find other peoples contributions all that....um because I think a bit differently ...I am a bit out there really but maybe that is not important...maybe ...maybe it is the slowness of it, that is actually really valuable..."*

#### **4.3.7 Space for new meaning**

All participants valued the idea that multiple viewpoints were heard as a natural part of the process – that all members of the group had an equal right to be heard and the process provided a space for this. Participants felt this was conducive to the emergence of innovative thinking and ideas. They were able to take time to

imagine new ways of doing things without having to hold onto and defend positions they would normally take. Unexpected new learning emerged when they let go in this respect.

***Participant 4:** - “It was about the process – it was totally about the process. Yeah a lot of the work that we did with that funded project was really trying to develop the dialogue that leads to change and that is so difficult to get ... to get people prepared to toss ideas around and not hold onto their sacred cows and to even imagine things – put aside their sacred cows and imagine other possibilities ...it was definitely about the process both times.”*

***Participant 1:** - “the same people contributed and they got confident contributing as well and I think that was one of the things that over time....was really interesting”*

## **Summary**

The main themes highlighted by participants about the dialogic process related to understanding the process and having the right to be heard. Concepts such as suspension, surfacing assumptions and feelings, being prepared and open to the process were referred to by the majority. Ideas such as multiple perspectives, diversity, reflective practice and emergent meaning were common to all. Understanding the importance of these key areas in the process of dialogue helped participants become comfortable with the process and thus stimulated other learning and creativity. These ideas will be further discussed in chapter 5 in relation to the literature on dialogue.

### **4.4 Key professional learnings that surfaced through extended dialogue**

Every participant had a real sense of individual growth and confidence in certain areas. These ranged from academic study, to political voice, to reasons behind action in leadership or ability to take risks.

#### **4.4.1 Risk taking, vulnerability and carnivalising**

The importance of risk taking was clearly identified with dialogue as opposed to the ‘safety’ of attending a conference or lecture by participants. When people attended the ILI they believed they had put themselves in a more vulnerable place than if they had done the latter. They had to expose their thinking and ideas as well as their feelings in order to truly participate in the dialogic process. They became more confident to take risks because of this. It helped some that this took place away from their usual workplaces. This allowed them a sense of freedom and play which aligns with Bahktin’s ‘carnival’ (cited in Lock & Strong, 2010).

***Participant 5** - “Sometimes you go to conferences and you went to be safe and this leadership thing didn’t allow you to be safe – in some ways I think we need to keep taking risks – you see grandmothers giving their own fears to their grandchildren – we have to avoid that sort of thinking and let them find out for themselves and take risks ourselves also ... I just wanted to go somewhere where I was anonymous and I wanted to somewhere that was different [from my usual workplace and colleagues]”*

***Participant 4** - “I [usually in everyday life] tend not to share ideas unless I have thought it through ... I guess the risk is though, that if you put it out there no one responds to it....(smile) it’s always a risk.”*

***Participant 2** - “I just remember about staff meetings where you might have ten minutes to talk about something and you don’t get past the surface but coming here when you have three or four days to really unpack something and meander and explore.”*

#### **4.4.2 Presence and listening**

Participants felt that they had developed a deeper learning in the ILI both because of the process and because of the content of the think-pieces. They understood the

relationship between listening carefully and bringing their full attention and regard to the conversations. They acknowledged that they had to be fully present and realised they were not just having the usual sort of discussion – they had to work at listening and responding. Tapping into this profound way of learning was a major reason for repeated attendance at these dialogues.

**Participant 5:-** *“sometimes you didn’t want to feel stupid so you made yourself really think...and sometimes I had to really listen ... (sigh)”*

**Participant 6:-** *“Oh yeah, yeah, yeah in an intellectual way I learnt all about the fact that there is a deepening of understanding that comes about, like an enlightenment that comes about with totally comprehending what people are talking about or trying to articulate. I mean when we first started a facilitator said ‘I want to talk about dialogue’ and I thought ‘O god’ and then suddenly realised that dialogue is actually a lot more than percussion, discussion, conversation and machination – you know the whole shooting works – so it was a good personal wake-up call as well”.*

#### **4.4.3 Parallel individual growth and social constructionism**

Participants noted that the group was necessary not only for the collective learning but informed the individual learning that was taking place simultaneously. The learning happened despite their own viewpoint sometimes and one participant commented that it seemed to come about unintentionally – because as the group was moving forward then the individual was pulled forward as well. Political viewpoints adjusted, thinking was challenged and a more profound learning occurred when people were able to reflect together about the topic at hand.

**Participant 6:-** *“It is like on a boat – the boat moves forward – well the water on the swimming pool also moves forward....it doesn’t matter that it is a discrete substance or a discrete way of looking at things; if you are all doing something at the same time then (and that is the word I referred to before) that gesalt or a collective consciousness or something will move forward.”*

*Participant 8:* - “[the thinking] went on in my own head while we were talking; I didn’t share it because it was about how I thought my role fitted in my own workplace.”

#### **4.4.4 Challenge to world view**

As noted earlier it was for the challenge to their thinking that participants returned to the ILI. All participants found their worldview challenged in some way. In forging relationships within their groups they were challenged to articulate their beliefs. Results showed that the expectation that leaders should hold all the knowledge is refuted by dialogue – it allows for challenge in a non-confrontational way and that is seen as good for leadership by the participants of this study.

*Participant 2:* - “I think rather than say yes it is a process that is worth doing because it changes my leadership I would say that yes it is probably worth doing because it challenges my leadership and therefore it is of real value.”

*Participant 8:* - “[the process is] intuitive and taking it from where we are now and moving on and then trying to reflect on it as we go”

*Participant 4:* - “So my understanding around form and function which I understood the concept but I had no language for, when I had the language then it gave me greater boldness [to explain my world view]”

#### **4.4.5 Trust and relationships**

Trust played a major role in all participants’ learning. Participants were highly focused on the sense of communion and the depth of communication that they felt. By being present and taking part in the group dialogue they opened themselves up to experiencing things in a more meaningful way. Trust was

central in conversations about process and learning as well as ongoing benefits of dialogue and will be addressed further in chapter five.

***Participant 1:** “So I think that one of the first things through the process of the ILI and using a dialogic process was that you develop really high levels of trust in the people with whom you’re working.”*

***Participant 3:** - “I think I learnt a lot from the people that were part of the Institute as well as learning heaps from the people that were presenting”.*

Relationships developed quickly with others when participants developed their own ability to be open and ready to meet difference as well as to be reflective. These understandings helped them to continue processing and constructing knowledge and overflowed into their lives outside of the actual institute.

***Participant 4:** - “It certainly had a significant impact and our association definitely changed – it was still incredibly frustrating but there was definitely a desire for more and some relationships were solidified....people became determined to grow and develop”*

***Participant 1:** - “I made some reasonably strong professional relationships with people who I still keep in contact with now”*

## **Summary**

Major ideas that were relevant to participants’ learning at the dialogues included personal growth in confidence and risk-taking, deeper understanding because of this, development of trust to facilitate deeper communication and to challenge themselves. Group reflection enhanced self reflection and promoted new attitudes such as openness, readiness to embrace alterity and the desire to be reflective.

## **4.5 Ongoing effect of dialogue**

All participants felt that there was an ongoing effect from having participated in extended dialogue, particularly in assisting participants articulate their beliefs and their thinking.

### **4.5.1 Self belief and confidence**

**Participant 7:** - *“Mm um yes it does have an ongoing effect and I think it is a positive one. Because what I realised particularly going back and studying later as a mature student, without sounding too academic about it, is the theory into praxis – you need the theory to get a justification that you can rely on, as to why you are acting the way you act. That was crucial for me and I came out with that on both occasions actually. Also the importance of ... as I said before, that education roles can be quite narrowing and that you have a responsibility to be grounded by some research. Not just because you think this is the right thing or pathway.”*

Articulating their personal beliefs clearly in their leadership situations and operating with a higher level of confidence was cited by almost every participant.

**Participant 4:** - *“Yes and I became more outspoken and in more effective ways and not just emotional. But probably also much more able to decide ‘no now is not the time’ but I definitely became so much more clear about what I could say and what I should say I challenged so many things since 2008 – in those years – huge things so yeah that definitely impacted my leadership... I guess that decision that I made that I was going to speak my mind... I mean I can’t say it came from that moment but I have done things since then where I came down and met with the Deputy Secretary for Education about real issues to do with our region and I became the squeaky wheel...”*

**Participant 6:** - *“Well I did before but I think I did it better when I came back. I believe I had a better understanding of some of the things I needed to do to be*

*effective... it was empowering people and giving them the reins to run with. I didn't micromanage to the same degree as I had because I articulated what I wanted done, my expectations and the level to which my expectations could be met."*

#### **4.5.2 Connectedness and trust**

After experiencing the dialogue and moving back to their leadership roles in education they still retained a sense of connectedness due to having participated in the process as well as having made strong connections at the time. This was also mentioned as a motivation to continue repeating the experience.

***Participant 1:*** - *"I guess the other side was that I was fortunate that in the groups that I was with there were people who I really enjoyed working with and from the first ILI there were some people that I still keep in touch with, a couple of principals who I became quite mates with and the same has happened after the second one actually."*

The sense of connection referred to by participant 1 related back to the high levels of trust that had been achieved through the process. Some participants were able to start building that with their own colleagues, developing a cascading climate of trust in their own schools.

***Participant 1:*** - *"And if you think back to that process of actually developing really high levels of trust – if you reflect on that – the importance of that in terms of a leadership context – that you trust your staff or you demonstrate that you trust the people around you and they know that they can trust you as well; that's hugely powerful because we know that high levels of trust in an environment is a place that helps an organisation to be effective because people are prepared to get out and do stuff and take chances and challenge themselves and I think through a dialogic process that trust is one of the key things."*

The seeding effect related to connectedness and relationships and leadership could stem from a single stray idea that may have occurred in ‘thinking on the side’ as one participant described it:

**Participant 5:** - *“it is not until later – even my staff said ‘oo you have brought...’ – you know I have probably distributed leadership better since then. I have now got to the stage where I have had to step back and I have now got a coach if you like coming in. That all came from there so we now have a mentor coming in and so we have a tier of leadership in the school so it helped me to devise up the units. So that all this actually came from there ... Yes and if it didn’t come exactly come from there it was the thinking I was doing on the side and the doodling and you know you were supposed to write in that journal....”*

A possible stimulus for this level of generativity might be because they had the space to think laterally and innovatively without time pressure or monetary worries or day-to-day concerns. They had the chance to hear the stories and wonder if they were transferable to their school and then act on those ideas later when they returned to their schools. They had the confidence to explore these ideas with others and talk about innovation and change:

**Participant 7:** - *“Mm. I think that was....um when you take it back to an organisation I think you have a responsibility not to scare them with too much of the theory. What you have got to see is that it is personalised for you but it is your job -you have to make it make sense to people in your organisation without too much of the “this is from xyz, 2010”. They don’t want to hear that, a board of trustees don’t want to hear that. However it is there if they want it, yeah? So it is finding a balance of how to communicate that through. But what it does do...what it did do for me was make me very confident. Quietly confident about why I was doing, about why I was challenging, about why my actions were this way....”*

Four participants commented on the fact that they continued the international connection and/or relationships with other educational leaders in NZ. In particular one felt that he had been successful in growing a working relationship with a colleague and that the extended dialogue had definitely aided this. The two of

them had established a strong connection and they were able to set up international connections for other staff members because of the ILI as well.

### **4.5.3 Seeding of ideas and self growth**

The fact that self-growth continued to happen afterwards was mentioned by all participants. The learning that began at the ILI continued to develop as they re-entered their workplace. This was clearly important to participants.

***Participant 3:** - “It was managing myself and changes of attitude towards how I was approaching what was happening in our school and being brave enough to believe firmly in something to ensure that it actually was followed through and I guess that you have all sorts of feelings that run through you at that time; from being afraid but knowing from the convictions that you hold that you are on the right track and so you keep going and I guess a sense of fulfilment when what you are pushing for you can see having some results and then after a while hugely great results which is what happened. But always keeping in mind of course that you never get there – you are always learning and that there are always things that you can improve on.”*

In this study participants believed that the more experience they had of extended dialogue the more beneficial the process became. It allowed them to relate more effectively, develop greater tolerance and appreciate difference.

***Participant 2:** - “Yeah possibly I think probably it allows you to be more relaxed about going because you know the process... um so I suppose there is that about it but you know I am trying to avoid using the word expert because the expert tends to be somebody who thinks they know it all and I think understanding the process doesn't necessarily make you an expert but it makes you open to more of the ideas and more of the process because I think that if you are not open to the process of dialogue then sitting there for two or three or four days is actually quite frustrating.”*

Some participants were already able to see how they would do things differently in the future because of the Institutes. A common theme was the idea of taking another staff member so two people could experience the process at the same time or sending other staff to experience it on another occasion for staff development.

**Participant 3:** - *“the next time I thought it was really important that I go with staff- so that you actually experience it together- pointless sending them off separately when you may have experienced something different - you actually need to be together...So taking it from there and thinking yes we can move this forward but how was I going to do that? I needed staff on board with me and to get them on board with me um - I got no traction just talking to them about the experience and so I realised they had to go through the experience.”*

**Participant 2:** - *“Yes, yes I think the benefit of it would be that you actually went to different tables ...yeah and in fact I can recall two Australians from the same school going and they would catch up at break times to talk about what they were doing (and yeah it is amazing how these sort of things can just really jog your memory) but to me that would enhance what you took away and it would impact more on your school...”*

An extension of that was the plan to try and implement the dialogic process in their own workplace in some form or another. Some managed this by building it into their annual staff retreat. Others hoped to be able to replicate the process once a majority of their staff had experienced it. Whatever the plan the general belief was the more staff they could send to experience extended dialogue the better for the school:

**Participant 6:** - *“Because I know what intellectual gains they would make. Because I already know where they are operating from or I am guessing at the level at which they are operating from and I know that the experience would thicken that up, it would deepen it, it would make it more meaningful for them; not only in terms of, or in the context of their leadership but also in developing their own personal belief in themselves and what they are doing – much as it did for me.”*

In particular there appeared to be a seeding effect from the extended dialogue that created bursts of ongoing learning and sense-making long after the actual institutes had ended.

***Participant 3:** - “Umm we did lots more reading of current research and we had lots of questions. And I think that was really worthwhile. They were questions that came out of the Institute from people’s presentations and where people would question whether that was actually right and so they would go and find relevant research to either confirm or whatever or still have questions in their minds which was also fine. So I think it resulted in a lot of thinking, a lot of reading ... um and a lot of dialogue between us as a leadership group; about what did it mean for us and what did it mean for the school? What did it mean ultimately for our students? ...And also a lot of listening. Listening to others points of view...a good experience for us all.”*

The type of learning here that has been stimulated by dialogue is profound, generative and creative. Participants have been empowered to question, research and critique ideas in education and indeed their own understanding of the world. Their learning impacts directly on the students of their school as well as their leadership.

#### **4.5.4 Coaching and mentoring application**

A learning that developed for many was the use of dialogue in coaching and mentoring situations. This appeared to be in part due to process and in part to content learning and conversations about leadership in the ILI.

***Participant 3:** - “Coaching and mentoring was quite a new concept at the time and I found that fascinating how much sense that was – very practical and the value that can be gained from such a relationship.”*

After returning to their school three participants mentioned appointing someone with specific responsibilities for coaching and mentoring in their schools.

**Participant 3:** - *“That person didn’t “do it all” in inverted commas but actually coached and mentored others to coach and mentor others and that was a direct result of the Institute and a change in thinking and I think we were probably one of the first schools in New Zealand to embark on that.*

**Participant 4:** - *“My whole thesis was around the importance of interactions and coaching and mentoring and how that impacts on and develops leadership...their ability to place themselves in their interactions and that is kind of what is happening in the dialogic process. It's that you know - do I say something or do I not, do I put my voice out there or do I sit back and allow others- and so in a way there is quite a lot of linkage”*

#### **4.5.5 Renewed reflective capability and openness to new ideas**

Indeed the way we talk to others and reflect with others was an area that most participants felt was changed by being a part of the dialogic process. By adhering to guidelines about how to behave in the group they were able to expose thinking and prejudices in a non-confrontational manner. This allowed an openness with others which was not usual in their daily interactions. It also meant that the depth of communication was greater and the ability to reflect on actions and ideas was enhanced. The fact that dialogue allows people a space to talk professionally without inhibition, on an equal footing, was also carried over to the workplace with one participant stating it was exceptionally important in being able to talk through situations and have a professional conversation rather than a personal one when difficult issues needed addressing.

**Participant 3:** - *“The other thing I think that we all took on board as a result of the Institute was the dialogue, the open conversations and the taking things professionally not personally...”*

**Participant 1:** - *“I have been quite fortunate in that I have had the opportunity to use it in other contexts. Once I had done it I did a Coaching paper using Jan*

*Robertson's research which talked a lot about dialogue and reflective conversations and reflective questioning so that strengthened it and gave it quite a strongly structured context to use it outside the ILL.*

#### **4.5.6 Group thinking informs individual growth and vice versa as well as community**

As well as individual self development there was also a strong sense of interpersonal intelligence growth being stimulated by the dialogic process. Becoming more attentive to others and being present for them and understanding their right to be heard appeared to have been developed by dialogue.

***Participant 1** - "I really try to have an awareness of what other people are thinking and have an awareness of their perspectives as well and using that to shape a collaborative thinking and so yeah I think it did actually change me quite a lot in how I try to structure my conversations."*

In particular, techniques that aid in dialogue were singled out and mentioned in the results such as surfacing assumptions and listening carefully and suspending judgement as the following comments show:

***Participant 8:** - "Well the whole concept of dialogic process I think that I use the concepts of it all the time. So 'wait time' and not making assumptions and checking or validating your assumptions and all of those sorts of things I think I do all the time.... and I regularly reflect when I am in situations where we are working in groups."*

***Participant 3:** - "And an important part of that is listening ...because you haven't always as a person and this is talking about self and realisation of self ...um got it right."*

The process definitely continued to impact on participants' leadership after they had taken part in it. Some said they had a different approach to problem solving

and creative thinking in their own role. An example that follows highlights how in essence the leadership team was creating a new reality for what reading assessment would look like in their school and building something that they thought would be worthwhile for their learning community through a dialogic process.

**Participant 2:** - *“Some of the things you get from that dialogic process do stick with you and I was thinking of a specific example this year where the two DPs and I were talking about reading and reading achievement in the school and that sort of thing. For a day and a half we would go off and do something else then we would come back with “but have we thought about “... and it was that constant searching and picking apart and reflecting on what someone else would say and we were debating how you really measure reading progress in terms of National standards and all sorts of other things like that. It was a really good example of a dialogue that just continued as we got time and it got to the stage where one of the DPs said ‘well who wrote this who wrote the national standards?’” and so we found out and we emailed her and said this is what our dialogue is about and she was actually coming to do some work in Hamilton and so she came and had a couple of sessions with us....You know the dialogue...you know we all came from quite different view points ...well one of the DP’s was new to the school ...had been in the place a term...and so you were talking about a whole lot of ideas. All that we knew was when we started it was that there had to be better ways of doing what we were doing.”*

It is carrying that reflective nature of the dialogic process over into leadership practice that seemed important for most participants as an ongoing effect of the experience. There were examples of participants thinking more regularly about their practice.

**Participant 3:** - *“Yes, and more deeply I think. I probably paid lip service to self reflection and self review really and I would say the right words but I am not sure that I was actually really doing it until after that first Institute...”*

## Summary

There is particularly strong evidence that repeated experiences of extended dialogue aided in leadership in an ongoing way particularly with relation to creating trusting relationships and new ways of talking with colleagues. A sense that change was possible because of growth in self belief and ability to articulate understandings was apparent to others. There was also a renewed energy for reflection on leadership practice as well as an openness to having professional conversations about interpersonal growth and coaching and mentoring.

The results presented in this chapter clearly identified areas for discussion and these are considered in more depth in the next chapter. Interestingly the voice of the participants held similar ideas. In particular dialogue was seen as beneficial to leaders in terms of challenging their world view, developing their relationships and enabling a profound learning to take place that continued to seed the thinking and ideas of their leadership long after they had finished the extended dialogue. As one interviewee said:

***Participant 2:** - “Because a dialogic process is a journey and it is a meandering journey sometimes – it is not a straight line...”*

## **Chapter 5 Analysis**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This study seeks to explore the influence of extended professional dialogue on school leaders who had attended two or more International Leadership Institutes in the Waikato. My research question included two parts – What are some of the influences on school leaders who undergo extended professional dialogues such as International Leadership Institutes? What is the nature and extent of these educational leaders’ learning and how does it impact on their leadership practice?

In addressing these questions a number of key areas emerged and the results are discussed here in the same order that they were presented in chapter 4 with the additional section on the silences that were noted:

- Motivations and reasons for undertaking dialogue
- Key understandings that surfaced about dialogue
- Key professional learnings that surfaced through extended dialogue
- Ongoing impact of extended dialogue
- Silences

These were further analysed into the subthemes that became apparent where understandings were common to more than one participant. How these results compare to the literature is discussed here and future actions that could be taken are suggested.

### **5.2 Motivation for undertaking extended dialogue**

#### **5.2.1 Developing relationships**

The development of relationships and the importance of building trust in order to do so was emphasised by all participants as a motivation for repeat attendance at the International Leadership Institutes. Dialogue appeared to allow this deep

connection to take place and this was reiterated time and time again in the data. In this the results align with Isaacs's (1999) suggestion that meaningful relationship is indeed a defining aspect of dialogue. His proposal was that it is useful to emphasise the ancient meaning of logos as 'relationship' so that dialogue could be defined as 'thinking together in relationship' (p. 19). Participants clearly felt that within the week-long Institute they had reached deep levels of trust with others in their group and this had meant meaningful relationships had developed with other educational leaders. It was the attraction of this type of relationship that drew them to the ILI (Isaacs, 1999, Schein, 2003; Scharmer, 2009).

A clear corollary of developing these meaningful relationships was noted in the participants' comments. They had also experienced a sense of self growth when they developed these relationships with others through dialogue. This is described in the literature (McHenry, 1997; Poulos, 2008; Schein, 2003; Shields & Edwards, 2005). By forging deep connections with others perhaps participants were able to explore the various ways of representing their 'selves' and their identities in the group. Here Gergen's challenge is relevant - that we need to let go of the idea that there is one true self that we need to sustain and reveal to others (cited in Lock and Strong, 2010, p 303). It appears that trust plays a major part in this. Participants could not insist on how the others in their group were to understand them, they had to be able to talk openly and question freely amongst themselves to gain understanding as a group. Seeking this type of trustful interaction and deepened relationship may be a prerequisite for experiencing meaningful dialogue (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2005).

### **5.2.2 Challenging one's leadership**

All participants were concerned about developing their understanding of leadership and indeed the focus of the dialogues that had been offered at the institute centred on educational leadership. Participants were motivated to explore repeated dialogue because of the opportunity it provided to experience different perspectives and new ideas that challenged their own thinking. Wanting this type of challenge appeared to have a strong impact on the type of experience

that eventuated for the individual. This concurs with Isaacs's pithy phrase "entry is everything" (1999, p.293). The way the participants approached the situation was a powerful determinant of the dialogic outcome for the individual. This led to them embracing 'otherness'; being prepared for the challenge and the cross fertilisation of thinking sparked by interdisciplinary ideas becoming exposed (Kedian, 2008; Scharmer, 2009; Schein, 2003). They wanted other points of view to be tabled and were prepared to open up the space for a renegotiation of the way they looked at the world.

For most participants, connections were made with others that helped reduce the isolation often inherent in traditional leadership models. For some, the challenge helped them renew their beliefs and create new ways of doing things in their own professional role. Shields (2004) endorses the importance of dialogue in educational leadership, stating that it should not be interpreted as a weak concept, ie just as a strategy for communication but rather as a strong concept such as "dialogue as a way of being" (p. 115). One participant suggested that the challenge for educators is to recognise how our world view can be narrowed when we focus solely on education. Shields (2004) argues that we need to understand how the 'habitus of education has been constructed and to find ways to overcome the way in which this habitus restricts equity and social justice' (p.116). Dialogue appeared to offer a way for educational leaders to validate and acknowledge difference without reifying it or pathologizing it (Shields, 2004, p.113).

Another challenge that motivated some leaders was looking at how they could then transpose dialogue into their own school environment so that it would begin to have an effect on teachers and learners alike. One described it as a 'springboard for looking at leadership structures in their own school'. A number of writers propose that utilising dialogue is a way of promoting a transformative leadership that provides opportunities for democratic learning across the community (Burbules & Rice, 1991; De Turk, 2008; Pearce & Pearce, 2010). This has implications for issues of social justice in schools in New Zealand and provides a way to encompass the diversity present in today's schools.

### **5.2.3 The luxury of time to reflect**

Every participant commented on the importance of reflection in the dialogic process. One went as far as to say that the focus on reflection was the most valuable part for them. For most, a major motivation for a repeat experience was to have *time* to reflect on ‘important things’. Making space for reflection in their daily activity and the value of reflection came up in every category of this study. In order to remain true to the data it is briefly mentioned here in this section on motivations. However it will be discussed more fully in the next section as it emerged as a key understanding that intersected all participants experience of dialogue.

### **5.2.4 Professional learning and change leadership**

Repeat attendance at the institutes, with their dialogic approach, also occurred because participants wanted to utilise it as a form of professional learning. Participants commented on the deep learning that occurred for them. They saw dialogue as an effective way to build their own knowledge and extended dialogue was used to introduce colleagues and other professional friends to the process. McHenry’s (1997) argument, that we need teacher training that utilises dialogue, goes even further. He believes that unless we have this commitment to encounter we may lose our ability to transmit new knowledge successfully “and with it the possibility of reinventing our culture together” (p.10). Participants agreed with Shields and Edwards (2005) that promoting dialogue for all members of a learning community is useful and that they needed to learn to speak together and be free to participate in the dialogue.

Participants at these dialogue sessions were looking in some instances for ways to initiate a culture change in their own workplaces. Schein (2003) suggests that the main difference of dialogue from any other good communication is that it focuses on getting in touch with underlying assumptions about why we think certain things in order to enable the group “to reach a higher level of consciousness and creativity through the gradual creation of a shared set of meanings and a

‘common’ thinking process” (p.30). This concept is vital when one seeks to utilise dialogue in change leadership – the more the group learns to think collectively and achieve a collective understanding the easier it is to reach a decision or implement a new action as the group had envisaged it.

### **5.2.5 Profound learning**

When the participants talked about deep learning and profound learning as a motivation for participating in dialogue they were utilising concepts introduced by West-Burnham (2005). Some referred to him directly as having provided them with a clear understanding of these concepts. He distinguishes the deep learner as one ‘able to integrate theory and practice, to create holistic models and to distinguish between evidence and debate’ while profound learning ‘is what makes us a person, it gives us a sense of uniqueness and determines our ability to think and act for ourselves’ (2005). In particular three participants commented that profound learning occurred for them in which they developed personal wisdom and meaning, which allowed them to accept responsibility for new ways of doing things in their world of education. It appeared that dialogue allowed them to move away from the structures and constraints of academia and allowed a trans-disciplinary perspective of knowledge which Bohm argues brings us back to a less fragmented understanding of the world (Bohm, 1991; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2005; Kedian, 2010). Participants were describing the type of real learning that Senge (2005) suggests “gets to the heart of what it means to be human” (p.14). He argues that this type of learning enables us to do something we were never able to do; it allows us to re-perceive the world and our relationship to it which extends our capacity to create and be a part of the generative process of life (2005, p.14).

## **5.3 Key understandings that surfaced about dialogue**

Interestingly participants had little difficulty in separating their learning into two main areas; that of learning that occurred around the process of dialogue and that which was more content based such as learning about leadership or

education. This section considers concepts that relate directly to the process of dialogue and the next addresses some of the commonalities in the professional learning described by the majority of participants.

### **5.3.1 Being comfortable with the dialogic process**

It was notable that all participants commented on the fact that as they developed their understanding of the dialogic process they enhanced their ability to develop a shared meaning with others in their group. Analysing their responses highlighted that comfort levels rose as expertise and knowledge of dialogue rose. Frustration with the process reduced considerably when the experience had been repeated. This aligns with thinking that suggests explicit discussion of the process is useful and that ongoing participation in dialogue helps develop relationships and group interactions (De Turk, 2008; Frey, 2000; Isaacs, 1999; Shields & Edwards, 2005).

### **5.3.2 Trust and the right to be heard**

A major element of the success of the dialogic process is the ability to be able to trust others in the group and in all instances the results reflected that a feeling of trust did develop over time. Participants commented that the process ensured each persons' right to be heard and knowing that what they said was valid and had an equal value at the table played a big part in developing the feeling of closeness with other members of the group. This aligns with the thinking of New Zealander Ron Harre and his doctoral student Holiday. Their argument is that there are three conditions needed for the possibility of communication that are of a moral nature – that of trust, justice and ritual (Harre, 1997). While trust is fairly self-explanatory, justice applies to the idea that if we ask others to listen to us then we must accord them the same respect – the complementary right to be listened to. One participant commented that there came a moment when all the members of

the group realised that they needed to listen to the other person in order to see how their thinking related to their own. This appeared to enable the next condition Harre referred to. 'Ritual' here refers to the fact that conventions of language cannot be established by force but rather occur because we have a shared "reverence" for social procedure. Again the statement by one participant that group members needed to trust both themselves and the process is insightful. While it is part of understanding the process of dialogue, the concept of trust is further considered as a key learning in its own right in the next section.

### **5.3.3 Suspension and surfacing assumptions**

The findings of this study highlighted the thinking of Bohm and Nichol (2003), that when the group meets repeatedly in a process of dialogue the social conventions begin to wear thin and the content of sub cultural differences begins to assert itself regardless of the *topic du jour*. "This emergent friction between contrasting values is at the heart of dialogue, in that it allows the participants to notice the assumptions that are active in the group, including ones own personal assumptions" (p. xi). It is in the surfacing of and attending to these assumptions that the group becomes able to deal with multiple perspectives at one time and it is here that the development of trust and acceptance begins. However while it may appear simple at first it is not necessarily an easy process. Participants referred to feelings of disrespect for others in their professional and personal practice as well as their differing ways of thinking and communicating (Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 2003). The time needed to develop authentic trust is an unknown quantity but it seems by the end of four days most groups had managed this. Participants noted that the movement of the dialogic process was not linear but rather 'meandering'. There were periods of intense emotional and cognitive exploration interspersed with periods of frustration, boredom or 'thinking other thoughts' while still engaged in the process.

One of the keys to the success of dialogue appeared to be the understanding of the concept of ‘suspension’. Bohm (2003) points out an issue which he calls the issue of “the observed and the observer”. According to him we cannot help but utilise an inner central entity – a “self” which observes and acts upon itself. Where the participants developed an ability to suspend an assumption or reaction they neither repressed nor reacted but rather “attended” to it fully. They let thoughts and ideas be tabled without shutting them down instinctively; they mulled, they let be and absorbed. Thus they gave themselves the space to pay attention to the idea as well as the reactions that came with it and the reasons behind the reactions. This suspension allowed then for a deeper understanding of the thoughts of others and self. It appeared that this was the key to ‘thinking together’. The more participants took part in extended dialogue the more this way of interacting with others became a part of their interpersonal intelligence skillset. They developed the type of behaviours that Isaacs (1999) attributes to being able to suspend effectively – they looked for key questions, they took time to wonder and be uncertain about things, they looked for the themes beneath their conversations and they began to practice collective suspension by shifting the ecology of their groups to begin to see alternatives and multiple perspectives.

#### **5.3.4 Openness to process and multiple viewpoints**

As participants opened up to others and suspended their assumptions on how their world should be viewed they came to a realisation that it was acceptable for there to be more than one way of viewing reality. There was no need to defend or argue their position; rather it could sit alongside other participant’s world views to construct a broader understanding. This realisation that individuals needed the ability to remain open to challenge and to be able to place themselves in a vulnerable situation in the dialogic process is reflected in the literature (Burbules & Rice, 1991; Isaacs, 1999; Keller, 1979; Poulos, 2008). The group members were in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; everything in dialogue is able to

be renegotiated and so they were continually questioning reflexively their worldview. As Gergen points out “Each reality of the self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The centre fails to hold. (cited in Lock & Strong, 2010, p.302)

### **5.3.5 Reflexive practice**

For a number of participants the extended dialogue developed reflective practice – importantly it seemed in two ways – individually looking at their own assumptions, values and practices and on another level as part of the collective. For as Schein (2003) points out, the “creative potential of the dialogue – its capacity to reveal the deeper structures of consciousness – depends upon sustained serious application by the participants themselves” (p. 34). Participants who were aware that their own “pictures of reality” needed to be explored and examined seemed able to then engage in a quality of reflective intelligence within the group that attended to representations which were tacitly formed and upheld at the collective level. Senge (1990) highlighted the fact that collective thinking together “allows a group to discover insights not attainable individually” (p.10). His concept of personal mastery recognises the importance of fostering our motivation to continually learn how our actions affect the world.

Developing their ability through dialogue to become reflective practitioners continued to enhance interpersonal intelligence for participants. As Gardner (1995) describes it they are not only “exquisitely sensitive to the need and interests of others” but they are “correlatively sensitive to their own personal configuration of talents, needs and fears” (p. 31).

### 5.3.6 Paradox

This is a word that came to mind over and over in analysing the results of this study. A number of paradoxes become apparent when looking closely at dialogue. First and foremost is that telling concept that we cannot demand dialogue – we can become comfortable with the process and open to it but just by gathering together and being open to it is no guarantee that true dialogue will take place. Demanding dialogue is contrary to an aim of thinking together and creating new knowledge.

Secondly there is the paradox that by opening up and saying 'this is who I am' to others and participating in the process we have changed who we are; that in the process of defining ourselves to an external party we redefine ourselves. Bakhtin discussed this in terms of language saying that words and symbols used by people in their communication “take on more meanings as they are used across time, place and particular dialogues” (cited in Lock & Strong, 2010, p 91). He understood there to be a plurality of meanings associated with any particular word or utterance and that the way the words were received by others in a particular instance of communication was as important as the way the speaker uttered them. The key to this then is that here is where the individual loses control over their utterance, here is where the possibility for new meaning and shared understanding occurs. This is the third paradox.

A fourth paradox that was highlighted by a number of participants was that the apparent simplicity of the process belied the depth and complexity of the interactions that took place because of it. In this their observations aligned with the thinking of Shields & Edwards (2005) and Isaacs (1999). There are relatively few conventions involved and no defined agenda, and yet the profound learning that took place occurred within that environment. People developed a sense of worth, a sense of wonder and creativity as well as a sense of clarity from taking part in what seemed to be a fairly simple conversation about leadership.

Finally the paradox of “the observed and the observer” as outlined earlier in Bohm’s (1996) thinking was noted by participants (p.xii). The dual role of self in dialogue – to be noting one’s own response and querying the reason for it as well as deliberating on the problem at hand is one that warrants careful consideration. It is perhaps this paradox that is the most central to the effectiveness of dialogue and participants noticed that they were questioning themselves and their actions and reactions at a different level than in their day to day activities. Schein (2003) calls it ‘learning to listen to ourselves before we can really understand others’ (p.33).

### **5.3.7 Space for emergent meaning**

It appeared from the data that extended dialogue enhanced the opportunities for new meaning to emerge. When a participant put forward their view, another responded and the difference between what the first intended and what the second understood was highlighted. Through focusing and reflecting on the difference and the why of the *mis*-understanding, the group developed a continual emergence of new content that was common to all. So rather than one person transmitting knowledge that was already known, the group was making something together; co-creating new meaning.

Participants realised this was made possible by an understanding of the process of dialogue which encompasses an understanding of the rights of the individual to be heard and trusted, alongside a readiness to surface feelings and assumptions by reflecting on and attending to the multiple viewpoints offered to the group. Thus as Arnett et al. (2008) suggest the emergent meaning does not belong to any particular communicative participant but “is a product of the relationship” (p.3).

It was commented on by one participant that new knowledge 'just happened' and that the group focus was strongly influenced by this emergent meaning. The group followed the flow and went ‘where the group thinking led them’. He may have been trying to describe the nature of 'joint action' to which Shotter ascribes. That “special form of social activity that cannot be

attributed to any of the individuals involved in it, but which is itself productive or the 'situation' that they are in and, as such, provides them with the resources for their continued action within it” (Shotter in an email interview with Tom Strong, 2010). The key for him is that what happens between people belongs neither to one nor the other, but is in fact theirs. Comparing dialogic learning with the learning he gained from attending a conference one participant said got ‘nothing’ from the latter but the former took him on an extended profound learning journey. This journey belonged to the group he was a part of and to the ILI dialogue. The results of such interactions are public property and “are intrinsically creative in that they are not just responsive to each other but also to the particular events occurring in the rest of their surroundings” (Shotter cited in Strong, 2010, p. 33). He concludes that “knowing along with others” is a social phenomenon that means 'the world of consciousness' is not be found hidden away, privately inside the heads of individuals, but is 'out there' between us, emerging each time afresh in our meetings (cited in Strong, 2010, p.33).

## **5.4 Key professional learnings that surfaced through extended dialogue**

### **5.4.1 Risk taking, vulnerability and carnivalising**

Participants in this study were unanimous that dialogue allowed them to take risks in their interactions with others. A prerequisite for people attending dialogue is a call for them to be able to be open not only to the thoughts of others but to questioning their own fundamental assumptions (Bohm & Nichols, 2003; Factor, 1998; Isaacs, 1999). Participants who found dialogue a worthwhile process commented that it developed the ability to be honest and take the risk of being vulnerable to others by being able to be “not sure” about something and to query themselves on why they thought what they did. This aligns with Kellers (1979) comparison of monologue and dialogue where he suggests that as we move from the former to the latter we move from a risk taking that involves a deep sense of trust in ourselves but little risk with others towards a risk taking that involves decreasing alienation

with others by opening ourselves up. His argument is that by risking full involvement with others we enter into dialogue with that person.

The idea of being able to embrace uncertainty seems to link in to Bakhtin's idea of 'carnival' that he utilised in his doctoral dissertation *Rabelais and his world* (cited in Lock & Strong, 2010). He uses the term to describe liberating an individual from their normative experiences and behaviours; a chance to be a person released from convention and known identity, to be on an even footing with all others, a luxury of timeout, a chance to experiment with thinking and ideas. Lock and Strong quote his writings “one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the established order; it marked the suspension of hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal” (2010, p. 94). The data showed that participants appreciated that chance to step outside their usual world and it helped bring a sense of playfulness to the process which also called for people to take risks and become vulnerable to others.

#### **5.4.2 Presence and listening**

Participants reported that repeated experiences of extended dialogue bring an understanding of what it is to be fully present in a group dialogue and what it means to truly listen. In this sense they felt it was not just the ability to thoroughly and carefully hear and empathise with the words and meanings of other group members (although this is part of it). Lee Nichols in his introduction to Bohm's work suggests it entails a listening “in which the very *mis*-perception of one's spoken intent can lead to new meaning that is created on the spot” (Bohm, 2003, p.xii). It was noted by all participants that they felt they had either learnt to listen or they had been given the space and license to really listen to other people in the dialogic process and that effort was involved. They needed to be fully present for the process to succeed.

This aligned with the thinking of Arnett et al. (2010) who argue that dialogic learning starts with the concept of listening and is central to the scholarship of such theorists as “a) Buber and the interhuman, b) Gadamer and the demands of the historical moment, c) Freire and critical consciousness and d) Arendt and listening to the dialectical information emerging between public and private spheres” (p.121). Participants agreed with them that ‘listening begins the act of learning’ and that it moves to an “attentiveness to that which is before us, rather than that which we might prefer” (2010, p.122). It is a kind of attentiveness that focuses on what 'self' is saying, what 'other' is saying and notes the historical moment of the communication. This kind of deep listening allows participants to focus on what is developing between the group and is key to the dialogic process. Participants noted that it was important to come to dialogue prepared to pay attention to difference and which echoed Gadamer’s theory that “reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both parties are ready for it and are trying to recognise the full value of what is alien and opposed to them” (cited in Lock & Strong, 2010, p.64).

One participant said it was clear that the attitude and approach people had coming to the dialogic process played a major role in determining the success of the experience. Scharmer (2010), in his book *Theory U*, aligns himself with Buber by saying that similar activities can result in very different outcomes depending on how people pay attention to them or put in a different way “ I attend [this way] – therefore it emerges [that way]”. He argues that understanding this may be the most underutilised lever for profound change today.

### **5.4.3 Parallel individual growth and social constructionism**

A central feature that emerged from the findings was the nature and quality of the thinking that took place in the dialogue. In addition to a new way of thinking it was clear that individuals were constructing a new ‘way of being’ based on the learning they took from the process. This appeared to be

important private learning that could occur parallel to the groups learning and was in some cases never verbalised to others – it occurred in the individual written reflections written or even just in their own thinking. Importantly though it occurred in tandem with the collective learning that was also taking place. It appears to mirror the kind of behaviour that is espoused in Theory U – the suggestion for new learning in this theory is that we need ‘co-presence’; to go to the place of individual and collective stillness, open up to the deeper source of knowing and connect to the future that wants to emerge through us (Scharmer, 2009). This allows us to co-create a new reality and explore the future by doing something fresh together. It seemed that the ‘thinking together’ also developed the individual thinking and brought clarity to that (Arnett et al., 2008; Barge, 2002; Isaacs, 1999). Shotter (1993) argues that this is indeed how we construct our realities.

Participants were clear that the group learning informed their own personal circumstances. They were questioning how this would look in their own workplace. Shotter (1993) explains that we cannot make our future occur by sheer force of our own conviction as to its possibility but rather we must relate our actions to what is at any one moment a real possibility. By thinking within the discursive space provided by dialogue, individuals seemed to be able to access a deeper understanding of their own reality and thus a parallel learning took place. What emerged for the group happened alongside what happened for the individual and both benefited in the process.

#### **5.4.4 Challenging world view**

One of the realisations about the learning that took place in extended dialogue is that it forced participants to look at their worldview because of the way it surfaced assumptions and explored them explicitly. One of the ways we value and protect our identities is through our language – we categorise our thoughts with it and so that meaning becomes comfortable and perhaps even predictable. In the dialogic

process participants came to appreciate the importance of the use of words. It was important to explain what some words meant for them as words not only have meaning they evoke meaning. The groups were developing their own subculture in order to work together more easily and this meant developing their own shared language. Schein (2003) suggests that functional and geographical subculture differences are highly visible and therefore easily noticed and this seemed to be the case with comments people made relating to their worldview. Hierarchical subcultures relating to power, and status and experience however were harder to expose. The data suggests that these were the most necessary to highlight however, in order to achieve change and understanding across the group and to develop trust amongst the group members.

#### **5.4.5 Trust and relationships**

The concept of trust was one of the most important that participants mentioned in the interviews. All commented in some form about the trusting relationship that had been built throughout the week and how this had opened up the way for new thinking and better communication and understanding amongst the groups. In conducting dialogue there is a process of “building the group” that takes place at the same time. People are working on issues of “identity, role, influence, group goals, norms of openness and intimacy and questions of authority” when they undertake dialogue (Schein, 2003, p.34). But when we focus on the dialogue as the main aim these other issues appear to resolve more quickly. Schein (2003) proposes that this is because dialogue creates psychological safety for each of the participants. By creating a ‘container’ as Isaacs (1999) describes it, for the dialogic process in which implicit and explicit norms are surfaced, participants are given a sense of direction and a sense that the dangerous aspects of interaction will be contained. By learning the skills of suspension, reflection and listening to their own thought processes as well as those of others in the group, people appear to become more comfortable with difference of thought and respect each individual’s importance to the group. Bohm and de Mare describe this by using the term “impersonal fellowship”. Bohm argues this is what makes authentic trust and openness possible in a group that has little previous shared history (2003,

p.x). Some participants were surprised at how emotional they were able to be without feeling shame and others were surprised at the depth of communication that occurred because of the process. They wanted to replicate this type of interaction with others in their own workplace and indeed in their lives in general. The trusting relationship was a motivation to attend dialogue, as well as a key learning about the process as well as an experience that people felt impacted on their leadership and lives after the dialogue was over.

## **5.5 Ongoing effect on leadership practice**

### **5.5.1 Self belief and confidence**

A positive outcome of attending the ILIs for each of the participants in this study was the increase in confidence that they perceived they had gained. The confidence involved different areas of their lives. For example some found they were more able to articulate their thinking more effectively, others felt more confident to tackle academic learning, others felt more comfortable with their leadership role and still others felt more confident in their political stance and worldview. Isaacs (1999) proposes that we increase our effectiveness to operate in an organisation when we discover what we do not know – and he defines two sorts of ignorance in particular. One is ‘blindness’; suggesting we cannot see our true nature clearly and that colleagues can often be more aware of capabilities and limitations we have than we are. The other ignorance he highlights is “unawareness”. This is where he suggests we have a tacit knowledge that we know but find difficult to articulate what it is. It seems to me that both these types of ignorance are ameliorated by the process of dialogue. Other participants in our group are given an opportunity to highlight what we may not see on our own and to help us articulate what it is that we need to know in order to progress. By allowing ourselves to let the group process expose our blindspots and make explicit our understanding in certain areas we gain in confidence. The data demonstrates that this confidence is important in building our belief in our self worth and the views we hold. It gives us a greater confidence to articulate our views to others which in turn allows them to understand us more deeply.

### **5.5.2 Connectedness and acceptance**

A feeling of connection with other members of their group was commented on repeatedly in the results. This connectedness was aided by the fact that each member could concentrate on the conversation in an attentive way without the distractions of day-to-day life. It seems that this is one of the things that leaders wanted to carry over into their interactions with colleagues – the concept of 'presence' in their dealings with others. Starrat (2005) described 'being present' as having a level of concentration and sensitivity to others that invites a person or event to communicate or reveal something of itself that is not just a surface level communication (p.69). In fact his form of being 'present' allows relationships to develop, concerns to be aired in a non-confrontational manner and participants to feel the unconditional regard the each has for the other.

One clear consequence of participating in the extended dialogue was that participants went back to their daily lives with a changed way of looking at their relationships with colleagues. Within dialogue there is a space – which is empty in a sense that it allows anything to come into it but does not require a decision to be made. It may require negotiation with others and this does require an acceptance of alterity. It appeared that this type of space became available to people in their dealings with others once they had experienced the process. The evidence suggests that participants found a greater familiarity with the dialogic process created a degree of comfort in which they were able to communicate fully. This could be construed as having developed an ease of "lowering of the guard". Particularly when more than one person from the same workplace had attended the institutes there was an ongoing ability to utilise dialogue effectively. As with the process itself, it was not always a smooth journey and the messiness of misunderstanding was ever attendant but nevertheless a desire and willingness to understand one another and develop a shared meaning became apparent. This upholds Bohm's (2003) belief that when we become able to sustain dialogue as he understands it then the change in people taking

part means that they begin to behave differently even outside dialogue (p.18).

The advantage for the workplace appeared to be in the belief leaders developed that the power to make change lay in their hands. Gergen (2009) describes it from a social constructionist view that “transforming ourselves, our relationships or our culture need not await the intervention of some expert, a set of laws, force of arms, bold leaders, public policies or the like. As we speak together right now, we participate in creating the future for good or ill” ( p. 12). Participants continued to utilise dialogue by creating spaces in their learning communities where acceptance was crucial; where they recognised the difference in others and accepted it. It appeared dialogue had encouraged participants to return to their own realities with a deeper understanding of and respect for alterity which they applied in ways such as instigating more distributed leadership or calling for more voices to be heard in their decision making processes.

### **5.5.3 Seeding of ideas and self growth**

A notable feature of the results of this study was the fact that dialogue produced a significant seeding effect. Many participants commented that something began for them while at the ILI – an idea or a way of thinking or ‘being’ that continued to develop long after the week of dialogue – perhaps “generative kernels” as one participant described them. These kernels came from ideas, conversations or side-thoughts which continued to germinate and produce a growth that maintained emergent learning, and altered the focus of their thinking and professional practice. This outcome is supported by Bohm (2003, p. xvi).

#### **5.5.4 Coaching and mentoring application**

Further to the results of the last three sections the dialogic process appeared to create an environment that facilitated the development of a coaching and mentoring relationship. The results also highlighted that many participants linked their experience of dialogue directly with that of coaching and mentoring. It was clear that they valued the idea of talking through their thinking with others without fear of reprisal or judgement and they wanted to provide such a development tool for staff in their own workplace. Arguably coaching and mentoring provides a sphere where relationships are both constituted and mediated through talk and in which final assessments and shared agreements are reached (Shotter, 1993). Perhaps the dialogical process utilised in some coaching relationships gives it the power to change otherwise unconsciously reproduced realities?

#### **5.5.5 Renewed reflective capability**

There was also for many participants (as one actually put it) “a wake-up call” to look at what was happening in their environment carefully. Burr (2003) suggests that “we need to take a more critical stance toward ‘our taken-for-granted’ ways of understanding the world, including ourselves, ie to be suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be” (p.3). Participants appreciated the opportunity to develop their ability as a reflective practitioner that extended dialogue provided. Long after the ILI had finished participants were still encouraging themselves and others to keep questioning their beliefs and actions. A number described that they were prepared to challenge others more confidently as they realised the benefit of reflection for all concerned.

For example one participant had allowed more time for a questioning/reflective session in their staff annual retreat. Another described the deeper understanding of the importance of reflection to leading change and that there was no more 'lip service' in regard to it. Indeed it is a key

requirement according to Senge et al. (2005) who explore profound change in their book “Presence”. They suggest that “most change initiatives that end up going nowhere don't fail because they lack grand visions and noble intentions. They fail because people can't see the reality they face” (2005, p. 29). Their call for us to see freshly by stopping our habitual ways of thinking and perceiving is definitely something that the extended dialogue process appeared to uphold.

#### **5.5.6 Group thinking informs individual growth and vice versa as well as community**

This study upheld the collective findings that Hurtado (2001) noted for the long term effect of dialogue on individual participants. They described an increased awareness of self, of alterity, of societal discrimination, as well as skill development in complex thinking, perspective taking and group communication. It also highlighted the importance of relations between self and others that dialogue develops (Arnett et al., 2008; Buber, 1965; Friedman, 1975). However the importance of the collective thinking on self and vice versa stood out also as a theme. Isaacs (1999) suggests that a process such as dialogue can help us all “see that there are aspects of all of us in each one of us: I am in the world and the world is in me” (p.153). He argues that an effect of dialogue comes from its call for people to experience firsthand the degree to which the world is in them and how responsible they are for their own actions. Some participants of this study definitely found they developed a sense of responsibility not only to their own growth but to others in their group. This responsibility for others carried over to the organisations in which they worked so that the thinking they took away from the dialogue informed the communities of which they were a part.

## **5.6 Silences**

One of the key questions that Isaacs suggests helps to suspend our ingrained thinking about a topic is “What am I or we systematically leaving out of this conversation?”(1999, p. 153). Analysing the conversations of this study in this way a number of silences became apparent.

### **5.6.1 Negative responses**

Interestingly, participants of this study did not describe any strong negative responses to the dialogic process which are often mentioned in the literature – feelings of frustration were mild if at all and no one experienced real anger or despair with either the process or other people in their group. This could be partly due to the selection process that asked for participants to have attended at least two extended dialogues. By requiring that, I had undoubtedly excluded people who had given up on the process or thought that it was not worth doing again.

### **5.6.2 Conflict resolution**

Surprisingly when analysing the results there was not any sustained mention of the role dialogue took in conflict resolution. One participant explained how he was able to make the group interaction more comfortable for a member, while another talked about the usefulness of dialogue in having “difficult conversations” in a professional setting. No one suggested that they utilised the concept in a conflict resolution setting at all as Keller (1979) did or that this was an area they utilised dialogue in their own leadership activity. This could be due to a number of factors, one of which is the relative inexperience of most participants with respect to the notion of dialogue. Another is in the way most viewed their leadership role and the day-to- day activity that they engaged in.

### **5.6.3 Health checks**

The idea of health checks within the dialogic process was another area that surprisingly did not warrant a mention. 'Health checks' is a term coined in the International Leadership Institutes to describe explicit discussion as to how the process was unfolding for each participant in the group. In fact in the last interview this topic was brought up deliberately but the response was that it was not something that this particular respondent felt comfortable with and that they did not utilise it overtly at all in their own leadership role. It was not particularly emphasised in the dialogues the participants attended and this may have had an influence. There also did not appear to be much discussion in the literature about what could be considered a key area to the effectiveness of dialogue. This is an area that would be useful to explore further as it appeared to play an important role in producing the 'impersonal fellowship' that Bohm and de Mare talked about (Bohm, 2003).

## **Chapter 6. Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to summarise the impact that attending extended professional dialogues had on educational leaders. This is addressed in terms of their motivation to attend, their experience of the process and the learning gained as well as the ongoing impact it had on their leadership. However, further to this summary, suggestions of future hopes for dialogue in leadership are offered. The importance of dialogue in developing connections with others, in improving our communication efforts and in generating new knowledge is clearly highlighted by this study. It supports the assertion that dialogue should play a vital role in educational leadership.

### **6.2 Benefits of extended professional dialogue**

Making time to experience an extended professional dialogue was considered valuable by the participants of this study because of the opportunity it provided to develop close relationships with other educational leaders and to expose themselves to fresh perspectives which challenged their thinking and professional practice. In this sense it played a major role in the profound learning that resulted for them and assisted them in practical aspects of change leadership and coaching and mentoring relationships.

In order to benefit the most from the dialogic process participants believed that becoming comfortable with it was a priority. This led to trusting the process which then meant aspects such as presence, regard, suspension, surfacing of assumption and feelings, explicit health checks and others were able to be successfully utilised. This allowed multiple viewpoints to be

expressed and encouraged a more reflexive approach to both the process and their leadership. Within a week it had created a space where it was possible for the group to think together at a higher level than they would have done as individuals and thus revealed important emergent learning.

Understandings about extended dialogue emerged from this study that suggested there is a strong ongoing effect of dialogue in the world of the participants after they return to their professional roles. An increase in confidence and self belief as well as a connectedness to other educational leaders led to a journey that assisted growth in their own learning communities. Kernels of ideas that seeded at the ILI were utilised alongside a renewed reflexive capability so that leadership practice continued to develop. Ideas of distributed leadership and coaching and mentoring applications became realities in their world and trusting relationships with their own colleagues were sought.

### **6.3 Limitations to study**

A small scale qualitative study such as this one, with its aim of understanding how extended dialogue assists in improving leadership capacity in a practical sense, is very much contextually situated. As such it highlights in depth knowledge about the experience of extended dialogue held by 8 educational leaders in the North Island of New Zealand. There is no attempt made in this study to extrapolate the findings to the wider population. However consideration of the results helps to play a part in the construction of a picture of what extended dialogue may do for educational leaders when placed alongside other studies made in this area.

### **6.4 Further research**

Research occurring within a social constructionist paradigm often raises more questions than it answers and this was partially the case in this study.

A number of areas in this research suggested ways forward for an increased understanding of the use of dialogue in education. One is the concept of trust that is promoted by Bohm (2007) as 'impersonal fellowship'. This concept suggests that authentic trust and openness can emerge in a group context, without its members having shared extensive personal history. It appears that this effect was increased by repeated extended dialogue for participants who had undergone two or more institutes. It would be of interest to research how they become a group who trust and have regard for each other through extended dialogue and so develop a new kind of mind which shares common meaning and that constantly transforms in the process. This is an area which would be difficult to research; that of 'mutual meaning construction' and how we in fact do that in what Buber (1958) called the 'between'. Does an understanding of social constructionism aid in this?

For future study we can also look at the paradoxical nature of dialogue including the paradox of the observer and the observed, the paradox of individual growth that is developed by group growth and the paradox of the complexity of thinking that comes out of such a seemingly simple process.

An issue mentioned at the beginning of this research was that of the number of females and males who attended the ILI. It would be of interest to explore the reasons for a lower number of females being present, whether this was due to the number of females in leadership positions in New Zealand or whether the dual role females play with regard to their families and their jobs meant that a week away from family was less able to be organised?

Finally an area of the process that has been promoted in the Waikato ILI is that of health checks. It appeared that this area, while vital to the making explicit of participants' feelings and understandings of the process, did not feature in the literature nor receive much comment in this study's results. Since it was an area that appeared to play an important part in the success of extended dialogue it would be useful to develop our understanding of it.

As a process extended dialogue informs communication, relationships, ways of thinking together and ways of growing together. Educational leaders in this study who experienced dialogue found it gave them a renewed ability to be reflexive and to be accepting of multiple perspectives. They understood that becoming comfortable with the process allowed them to develop learning in their own leadership role as well to promote growth in the learning communities they were a part of. Importantly dialogue promoted increased trust and connection with others that created the space to generate new ways of being with each other. It was a holistic approach that took a step towards healing the fragmentation of thinking processes that can occur in the business of daily life.

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## Interview Schedule

- Which International Leadership Institutes have you attended?
  - Why did you attend the first one?
  - Why did you attend subsequent ones?
- Tell me about or describe your experiences of the dialogic process?
- What stands out for you in terms of any learning that took place?
- Looking back how do you feel about what you thought before you went to the Institutes and what you thought after you attended them?
  - Can you compare the experiences?
  - Did the process impact on your emotionally?
- What thoughts have you taken away about dialogue as a process?

- How has undergoing this experience impacted on your leadership (if at all)?

These are core questions for participants however the nature of the responses and the context dictated other subsidiary questions as the interview progressed.