

DIALOGUE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR:
CONVERSATIONS ACROSS BOUNDARIES

by

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ABSTRACT

This study considers how cross-boundary dialogue can benefit the British Columbia Ministry of Education through an examination of participant experiences in a series of dialogue sessions. The study explores the nuances of dialogue across boundaries in a hierarchical and unionized workforce, learning communities, the concept of permeable boundaries within a hierarchy, the elements of dialogue, and the effect of organizational culture on the success of dialogue. The action research methods include a set of focused conversations, reflective journals, interviews, and a focus group. The main conclusions are that dialogue is a valuable strategy to gain perspectives across boundaries on important long-term issues and that the success of dialogue is related to executive support, the topic choice, methods of participant selection, and the use of strategies to effectively engage a group of diverse participants in positive interaction.

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CHAPTER ONE – FOCUS AND FRAMING

My research study offers an executive insight into a process to enhance communication across boundaries. It describes a process that may help in the journey to improved work environments in the public sector. I created an opportunity for colleagues in the British Columbia (BC) Ministry of Education to share ideas and learn from each other through dialogue. I examined the experiences of nine individuals in different roles and organizational levels as they engaged in a series of conversations on a topic related to BC public education. I conducted this project in the fall of 2007 and used action research methods that included interviews, reflective journals, and a focus group.

I am an education officer in the Partnerships and Planning Division of the Ministry of Education. I researched cross-boundary communication because it is of interest to me and corresponds with the responsibilities of this division. Since the beginning of my master's program I have supported interconnections among staff in the ministry and have purposefully engaged in learning about communication in organizations. I am intrigued by the idea that increasing communication vertically, horizontally, and diagonally has the potential to create a network of knowledge among all departments (Helgesen, 1990).

The Partnerships and Planning Division connects internally to all of the ministry's divisions and branches and externally with education stakeholders. For the purpose of this project, I refer to this responsibility as *cross-boundary communication*, which encompasses vertical, horizontal, and diagonal boundaries within the ministry. Horizontal communication occurs among colleagues within a department and across departments (Keyton, 2005); vertical communication, among "executive, supervisory and employee

levels” (p. 6); and diagonal communication, among departments and levels and encompasses vertical and horizontal interactions.

For this project I focused specifically on cross-boundary communication and based my research on the question, How can cross-boundary dialogue benefit the Ministry of Education? I also explored the following subquestions: (a) What is dialogue? (b) what does it mean to cross boundaries in a hierarchy? and (c) what do staff need to engage in cross-boundary dialogue?

The Opportunity and Its Significance

Since 2002 the Ministry of Education’s executive members have been encouraging leaders to provide frequent and lasting opportunities for employees to seek connections among each other and “to associate and intermingle across disciplines and between departments” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 258). In 2002 the past deputy minister began a weekly announcement on the internal electronic network called *DM Corner* to summarize meetings between the deputy and partner groups, provide information on internal events, and pose reflective questions to the staff. All ministry staff participated in the Business Planning Forums in 2004 and 2005. They identified organizational challenges and formed teams to address these challenges, and other initiatives followed. In June 2005 the staff analysed the core business responsibilities of the organization. The outcome of this investigation was a set of recommended improvements to ensure that the ministry is “doing the Right work with the Right resources in the Right way” (BC Government, Ministry of Education, 2005). Staff call this the *3Rs initiative*.

Despite these efforts, the results of the 2006 Work Environment Survey indicated that less than 50% of the staff agreed that information flowed effectively between

executive and staff (BC Public Service Agency [BCPSA], 2006a). In response to the survey results, ministry leaders turned the focus to internal communication, out of which came the Internal Communication Branch, which provides the infrastructure to support vertical, horizontal, and diagonal communication.

Another communication initiative is a Podcast that the deputy delivers to the staff following each weekly executive meeting. The Podcast content gives the staff information about the meeting directly from the deputy in a timely manner. In the same vein, managers across the organization meet monthly to discuss ongoing initiatives, workplace concerns, and programs and then communicate the meeting highlights to their staff.

Another internal communication initiative is the Deputy Minister Conversations, which began in the fall of 2006 as small discussions among about eight individuals and the past deputy minister that focused on improving communication in the organization. In January 2007 these sessions evolved into presentations and discussions about specific ministry initiatives and projects. The deputy and a staff member host the sessions, and the staff member presents information on an initiative or an element of work in the organization. These sessions have steadily gained momentum since their inception.

The Deputy Minister Conversations are a testament to the interest in and enthusiasm for learning and sharing information about initiatives and projects in the organization. For the purpose of this project, I extended the Deputy Information Conversations concept and facilitated three conversations with nine individuals from different departments and levels in the organization. The group discussed the topic of

vulnerable students in three conversation sessions. For the purposes of this document, I refer to this set of sessions as *Cross-Boundary Conversations*.

The cross-boundary conversation initiative helped the staff to learn more about different perspectives on vulnerable students. It also helped to foster an appreciation of the value of communicating with colleagues from different levels and roles in the workplace. It was an opportunity for colleagues to operate from an area of content rather than from a position in the organization. This project presented an opportunity for positive change and the possibility of improving communication across boundaries.

Systems Analysis of the Opportunity

The Ministry of Education is one part of the provincial government system. The BC Public Service Agency (BCPSA) employs the provincial government workforce, which is the public service. The public service is undergoing some significant changes. According to Jessica McDonald (2006; as cited in BCPSA, 2006b), deputy minister to the BC Premier and head of the BC public service:

The BC Public Service is undergoing a significant transformation driven largely by an aging population that is bringing about a rapid rate of retirements, an increasing competitive marketplace for skilled employees, new demands in our personal lives, and changing needs and expectations of the public we serve. At the same time, factors such as the global economy, the introduction of new technologies and increasing diversity of British Columbia communities introduce new challenges in public policy and intensify the complexity of issues public servants work on each day. (p. 1)

To continue to serve the public effectively, to ensure that the public has confidence in government institutions, and to support the changing environment of the workforce, the BCPSA is working to reshape the public service characterized by an aging labour population, a hierarchical unionized structure, and a workforce that has

experienced two significant reductions in staff in the past 11 years (BCPSA, 2007).

Given these factors, the process of reshaping an employment force of more than 30,000 people (BCPSA, 2006b) requires careful navigation on the part of public service leaders.

The public sector is a hierarchal organization, with authority dispersed throughout various levels and roles within the organization. The reporting structure of the public service flows upwards from unionized staff to nonunionized staff to the deputy minister, and the reshaping of the public sector is occurring within this hierarchal unionized environment. The nonunionized or excluded employees are managers, directors, and assistant deputy ministers. The unionized or included employees are the employees who support these leaders. The included employees contribute to the organization in various roles and offer expertise in administration, technology, subject content, finance, and program coordination.

As part of the overall reshaping of the public service, leaders are focusing on improving the quality of the work environment. Attention to the work environment arose in response to a report from the auditor general in February 2005 (BC Government, Office of the Auditor General, 2005) that described the public service organizational culture as risk averse and “focused more on self-preservation than innovation” (p. 4). This is not surprising considering that the public service workforce was reduced by 13% in 1996 and again by 13% in 2002 (BCPSA, 2007). The impact of the staff reduction was evident in the 1990s when the total public sector population averaged approximately 40,000 employees, and in the 2000s the population has averaged approximately 34,000 employees (Appendix A).

A significant impetus behind reshaping the organization is the fact that “45% of managers and 35% of bargaining unit employees will retire by 2015” (BCPSA, 2006b, p. 6), which will leave a huge gap in the provincial workforce. There is therefore a need to attract new employees to the organization. The public sector is focusing on the quality of the work environment to increase the confidence of the current employees and attract new employees. Leaders are creating environments that will help employees to feel secure in challenging the status quo, seek ways to improve performance, and communicate ideas openly to their managers. Every government ministry is required to do a yearly work-environment survey; and leaders are accountable for demonstrating improved results each year. These surveys provide leaders with information on areas of strength and areas for improvement. A review of the 2007 Work Environment Survey data specific to the Ministry of Education surfaced the need to attend to communication across boundaries (BC Government, Ministry of Education, 2007b).

Organizational Context

The BC Ministry of Education is one of 19 ministries that service the BC provincial government; it supports the provincial education system. This section outlines the ministry’s role and structure.

In the 2007/08 service plan the BC Government, current at the time of this research, Ministry of Education (2007a) stated:

The ministry provides leadership and funding, develops policy and legislation, oversees system governance, sets results-based standards, develops accountability frameworks, monitors performance and reports results for the K-12 education system. . . . The roles and responsibilities of the ministry and its partners are set out under the School Act. (p. 5)

At the time of this research in the fall of 2001, The BC Government (2007b) has five goals:

- (1) Make BC the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent;
- (2) Lead the way in North America in healthy living and physical fitness;
- (3) Build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, special needs, children at risk and seniors;
- (4) Lead the world in sustainable environmental management, with the best air and water quality, and the best fisheries management, bar none; and
- (5) Create more jobs per capita than anywhere else in Canada. (p. 2)

The success of the first three goals relates directly to the Ministry of Education's work.

In addition to supporting the political goals, each year the ministry is responsible for special initiatives, defined in the Speech from the Throne (Legislative Assembly of BC, 2007), that require time-sensitive development. In 2007, during the time that this research took place, the initiatives included a multitude of new projects and initiatives. Some examples include the development of literacy plans for all school districts, improved communication with teachers, improved language courses for Aboriginal students, sustainable environmental initiatives, health initiatives, changes in reporting structures and school board mandates, modernization of the curriculum, and changes to the roles of district superintendents. These initiatives are legislated through the School Act (BC Government, 2007a). Ministry employees are responsible for the development of the Throne Speech initiatives in addition to their current workload.

At the time of the research eight divisions reported to the deputy minister. Assistant deputy ministers (ADMs) led five divisions, superintendents led two divisions, and an executive director led one division (Figure 1). At the completion of this research the eight divisions were reduced to seven, and the executive director became an acting ADM. Each division consists of several departments, each of which has several branches.

The organizational chart for the ministry is a circle that represents the seven divisions, at the completion of this research in March 2008, rather than the traditional hierarchal chart, and its design represents the decreasing hierarchy in the organization. Leaders are working to flatten the organization's reporting structures as much as possible. It is significant that student achievement is in the centre of the chart. This reflects the mandate and focus of all work in the organization. The physical scope of this project extends throughout an organization of approximately 300 employees in two office buildings in the provincial capital, the city of Victoria, as well as a couple of sites in Vancouver.

My research focused on the concept of cross-boundary dialogue and calls for increased interactions across divisions and roles in the Ministry of Education. I have had the good fortune of having two deputy ministers of education support my research from its inception to completion. I began the project under the sponsorship of one deputy, but in December 2007 this individual changed positions in the BC government system. Therefore, in January 2008 the new deputy minister of education agreed to continue sponsoring my project. As a result, my project has benefited from consultation with and the support of two respected leaders in the BCPSA.

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the public sector environment and the context in which my research on cross-boundary dialogue took place. The concept of cross-boundary dialogue connects to the role and responsibility of the Partnerships and Planning Division and supports the organization's leaders in their ongoing work to address the work environment of the hierarchal public sector. The research study occurred in an organization that holds responsibility for three of the major goals of government.

In Chapter Two I outline and critique the academic and institutional literature on four concepts relevant to my research. This analysis provides the foundation upon which I based the research findings, conclusions, and recommendations of my project.

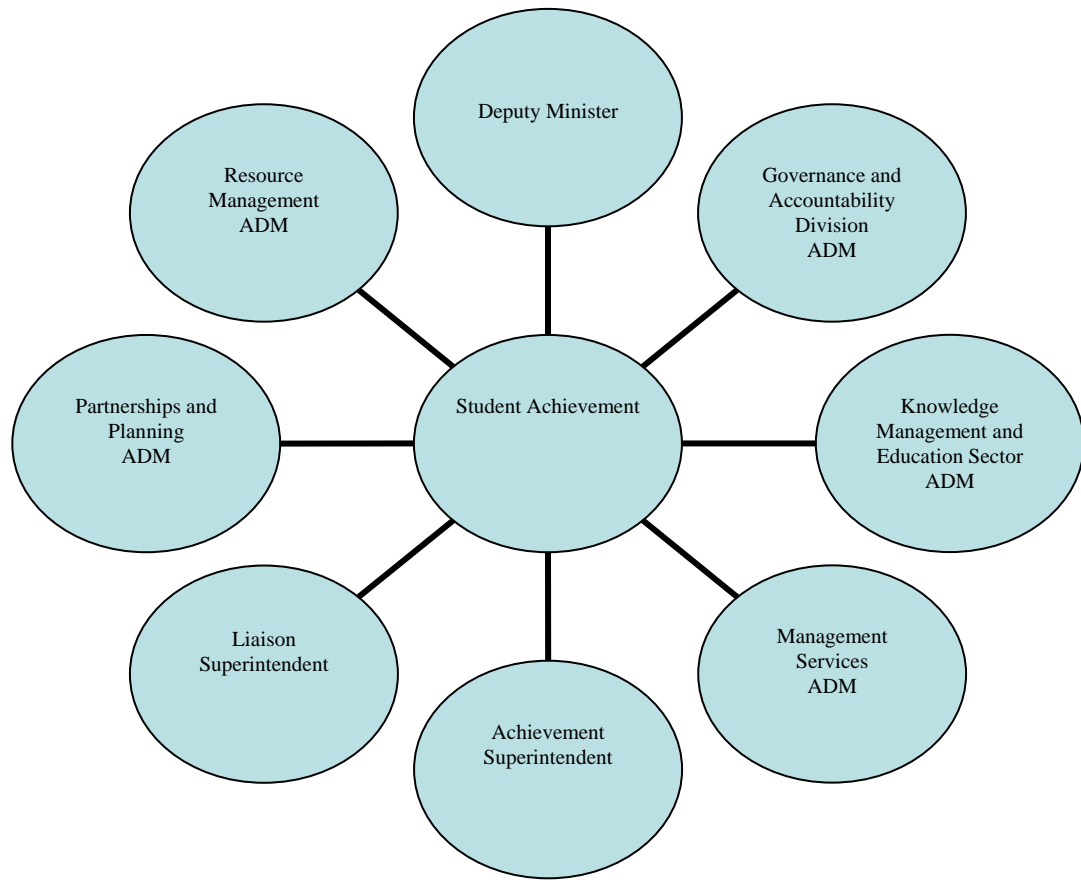


Figure 1. Ministry of Education organizational chart (March 2008).

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I place my research within the concepts of learning communities, boundaries, dialogue, and culture in organizations. I introduce the four topics for this literature review with the influence of society on organizational practice and structure, describe the necessity for organizational learning and how boundaries influence communication, present the idea of dialogue as a means to increasing communication across boundaries, and explore culture in organizations as it relates to communication.

My research and this literature review focus on the following question: How can cross-boundary dialogue benefit the Ministry of Education? I also explore the following subquestions: (a) What is dialogue? (b) what does it mean to cross boundaries in a hierarchy? and (c) what do staff need to engage in cross-boundary dialogue?

In the 1900s, the worldview focused on linear concepts, top-down power and control, competition, and structures and tasks. The characteristics of organizations included chains of command, communication through defined channels, offsite training programs, rigid structures and procedures, and linear thinking (Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004; Vaill, 1996). By late 1990 and into 2000 the worldview shifted to a systems-based, holistic view. Today, organizations are transforming to open systems with a style that includes shared leadership, collaboration, learning through communities, and flexible structures and procedures to improve the ability to adapt quickly to a changing environment (Beck, 2001; Gerard & Ellinor, 2000; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004).

The modern organization operates at a faster speed than those of the 1970s and earlier did. Until fairly recently, communication was accomplished by mail and telephone, which took much longer. As a result, required action occurred at a manageable

pace. Now that the Internet is the common tool for communication, customers, employees, and leaders expect quick responses, decisions, and actions. As a result, techniques, products, markets, and economies change rapidly (Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004).

To manage rapid change, organizations need to find new methods to tap into existing knowledge and skills and continue learning to keep up with customer demands (Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004). Organizations need to communicate across boundaries and use dialogue to build shared understandings of concepts, processes, procedures, and policies (Isaacs, 1999; Kahane, 2004; Keyton, 2005). To succeed at communicating across boundaries and through dialogue, an organization must ensure that its culture has elements that will support these forms of communication (Beck, 1999; Schein, 1993).

Learning Organizations

Jones, Mills, Weatherbee, and Mills (2006) define *organizational learning* as “the process through which organizations seek to improve organizational members’ capacity to understand and manage the organization and its environment so that they can make decisions that continuously raise organizational effectiveness” (p. 415). A learning organization is one that engages in a process of learning (Yeo, 2005). The main purpose for organizational learning is to stay competitive in the market (Gayeski, 2005; Jones et al., 2006; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004). The effectiveness of an organization depends on the knowledge of its members; therefore, it is incumbent on an organization to offer its members opportunities to increase and develop their knowledge (Ortenblad, 2004).

The main characteristic of organizational learning today is that it takes place in context at the workplace. Learning is not isolated to a location outside of the workplace. It takes place onsite because leaders recognize that if novices interact with experts, the

learning will be richer and learners will integrate the learning into the processes of their responsibilities as the learning takes place (Ortenblad, 2004; Vaill, 1996; Wenger, 1998).

The leaders in effective learning organizations promote continuous acquisition and sharing of new information and encourage employees to apply the new information as they make decisions and perform their work (Lewis, 2002). Leaders encourage individuals and teams to ask questions about information. They share information openly, accurately, and in a timely way with employees and promote an environment in which employees do not fear punishment when they speak out with their opinions (Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004; Lewis, 2002). Through the accumulation of information, employees gain an understanding of different perspectives and ultimately develop common thinking, practices, and approaches (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, & NetLibrary, 2002).

Wheatley (2006) emphasizes the importance of learning and information sharing in organizations:

One of an organization's most critical competencies is to create the conditions that both generate new knowledge and help it to be freely shared. More and more, there is an acknowledged benefit to sharing information within and beyond the organization, to doing away with the gates and blockages, to move past the hoarding and the fear, to developing trusting relationships. (p. 110)

This statement sets the stage for the next sections of this literature review with its allusion to the need for practices that support interactions across boundaries, the generation of new thinking through dialogue, and the importance of culture in fostering these practices.

Boundaries in Organizations

The following section is an overview of boundaries in organizations. I begin with a brief statement about business practices and an analogy of boundaries in organizations;

introduce and describe the concepts of hierarchal and network systems, including the related communication characteristics and challenges; and conclude with the recognition that boundaries will continue to exist in organizations and that there is a need to integrate hierarchal and network systems to create permeable boundaries.

Kikoski and Kikoski (2004) report that traditional business unfolded at a manageable and predictable pace. Today, business needs to move at a rapid pace to keep up with changes in techniques, products, and markets. To achieve success in this century, organizations need to have “speed, flexibility, integration, and innovation” (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 2002, p. xviii). For an organization to adapt quickly to the changing environment, the literature indicated that the practice of hierarchies needs to change and boundaries need to become more permeable (Ashkenas et al., 2002; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004; Leavitt, 2005; Wheatley, 2006).

Our society has boundaries, and therefore organizations have boundaries. Boundaries in organizations will always exist; some will be rigid, and some will be flexible (Wheatley, 2006). The boundaries in organizations are the floors, ceilings, and walls that divide departments and units. The floors and ceilings represent the vertical boundaries, and the walls represent the horizontal boundaries. An organization with permeable boundaries has multiple doors and windows in its walls and multiple ways to connect the floors (Ashkenas, 1999). In this environment “ideas, information, and resources can flow freely up and down, in and out, and across the organization” (Ashkenas et al., 2002, p. xii).

To understand the idea of permeable boundaries, it is necessary to examine the concepts of hierarchal and network systems to understand the boundaries that exist in

organizations. There is an ongoing tension between the two systems in that stability characterizes the hierarchy, and constant change characterizes the network (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Helgesen, 1995; Wheatley, 2006).

Hierarchical Systems

A pyramid is a common illustration of a traditional hierarchal organization. Jones et al. (2006) define *hierarchy* as “a classification of people according to authority and rank” (p. 112). The chain of command in which workers report to leaders, who in turn report upwards through the chain, describes the hierarchy. Labour is divided vertically: Leaders at the top of the chain conceive ideas and plan implementation; workers lower in the chain execute the plans and produce the product (Helgesen, 1995; Jones et al., 2006; Leavitt, 2005). This type of structure reflects the assumption that formal reporting structures maximize performance and achieve collective goals. It “champions a pattern of well-thought-out roles and relationships” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 45) within a pyramid structure.

The hierarchal system consists of vertical and horizontal boundaries (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Ashkenas et al. (2002) present an excellent description: “*Vertical boundaries . . .* separate people by hierarchical levels, titles, status, and rank. *Horizontal boundaries . . .* separate people in organizations by function, business unit, product group or division” (p. xix). Decisions regarding the structural form of an organization are challenging, and leaders need to balance the number of hierarchal levels and functional units. All organizations face challenges in defining the number of boundaries (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

Hierarchical organizations are criticized for being inefficient, authoritarian, impersonal, and unresponsive; however, hierarchical structures persist (Leavitt, 2005), and Leavitt identified human reasons for the persistence and reality of hierarchies. Hierarchies provide routes for personal achievement and a structure upon which to measure achievement and success. People claim success as they move up the hierarchy and improve their status and income in an organization. Leavitt illustrates the point that the hierarchy helps individuals to define themselves by presenting the following challenge: “Here’s a pop quiz: Write down—quickly, off the top of your head—three short answers to this question: Who are you? Do any of your answers have to do with your place in a hierarchal organization” (p. 34). He proposes that most respondents will identify their level or status in an organization or family. As a result, hierarchies “give us social identity cards to help us maintain the illusion that we are both significant and secure in an insecure world” (p. 49).

Leavitt (2005) also identifies structural reasons for the persistence and reality of hierarchies. Organizations inevitably develop hierarchal structures. The distribution of labour divides as organizations grow. In a small company the founders do all of the work at the beginning. As they grow, the company adds more people who take on different roles and do some of the tasks of the founders. The founders then become leaders and are responsible for different categories of tasks performed by small groups. This concept expands as the organization grows and results in greater complexity. The hierarchy helps to keep the expanding number of people and tasks in an orderly state (Jones et al., 2006; Leavitt, 2005).

Jones et al. (2006) outline levels of authority in a hierarchy. They identify four levels of authority in organizations with 1,000 employees, 7 levels in organizations with 3,000 employees, and 9 or 10 levels in organizations with 10,000 or more employees. Levitt (2005) argues that levels of authority enable efficient decision making because each person in the hierarchy knows who has the authority to make a decision. The structure of authority and roles helps to manage complexity in the organization.

One of the greatest challenges for hierarchal organizations is communication flow, and as Jones et al. (2006) explain, the more levels and units there are in an organization, the more boundaries there are for information to pass through. Boundaries limit the speed of communication and distort the accuracy of information. In a hierarchy, decisions need to pass through each level, which slows the decision-making process. As well, the information is manipulated as it moves up and down, which results in the potential for only selected information to reach either the top or bottom of the hierarchy. The negative effects of hierarchal communication are critical considerations when an organization has to adapt quickly to an environmental shift in technique, product, or market (Jones et al., 2006; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004). When the environment is complicated, complex, rapidly changing, uncertain, and turbulent, hierarchal systems become overwhelmed because decisions need to be made much faster than the structure can accommodate (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

Helgesen (1995) appears to be one of the strongest critics of hierarchies in regards to communication. She explains that information travels up and down, and direct communication across levels is discouraged. Hierarchies focus on rank and privileges rather than on the work of individuals and the resources needed to operate productively

and on exclusion by defining who will attend a meeting, who has a right to information, and who communicates with whom. All of these factors affect the flow of communication in an organization.

The concept of lateral or horizontal coordination that Bolman and Deal (2003), Jones et al. (2006), and Ostroff (1999) outline counters some of Helgesen's (1995) criticism of the hierarchy. Lateral strategies cross the boundaries of the hierarchy and assist with communication in organizations. The purpose of these strategies, which include meetings, task forces, coordinating roles, and matrix structures, is to bring individuals and teams from different divisions together to share information and coordinate the activities of functional units and similar positions. These are organic structures (Jones et al., 2006) that are flexible and arranged quickly.

At the Ministry of Education, a hierarchal organization, lateral communication occurs through executive meetings, management meetings, and ad hoc working groups. The ministry is an organization that has developed a network system that enables a hierarchal system to respond effectively to changes in its environment. In this research project I investigated how to enhance communication within a hierarchical system by developing cross-boundary networks rather than trying to replace the hierarchy.

Network Systems

Networks in the context of this research are a lateral form of human interaction in an organization. They are flat, flexible structures with few boundaries that focus on establishing connections and relationships across the organization. A network connects all individuals to each other with fewer organizational layers than a hierarchy has. It grows from its centre out, it responds and adapts to changing environmental conditions,

and it changes its structures constantly (Helgesen, 1995; Jones et al., 2006; Wheatley, 2006). Networks have a collegial atmosphere in which individuals from across the organization come together regardless of position (Helgesen, 1995; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004).

Helgesen (1995), Lipnack and Stamps (1994), and Wheatley (2006) contend that organizational networks are more appropriate organizational systems than the hierarchy is for the 21st century because of the need for organizations to respond quickly to changing markets and environments. Helgesen, a strong proponent for networked structures, claims that networks remove the concept of the chain of command and enable employees to communicate directly to create a more efficient and responsive organization. When organizations operate without a chain of command, teams, individuals, and functional units seek information from and share information directly with each other. Jones et al. (2006), Helgesen, and Wheatley suggest that, compared to a hierarchy, organizations with networked systems are able to make decisions much quicker.

Lipnack and Stamps (1994) suggest that networks are appropriate and successful structures when many people hold knowledge. Today, employees come to work holding a wealth of skill and knowledge. They have university degrees, college diplomas, life experience, and access to information through the Internet, and it is therefore beneficial to have a networked organization to access everyone's knowledge (Lipnack & Stamps, 1994).

Size is the limiting factor in a human network; the size of a network should be as large as possible while still allowing the network to demonstrate excellent

communication (Fairtlough, 1994). If the members of the network cannot communicate directly, the effectiveness of the network is lost. Fairtlough indicates that networks need frequent interaction and communication; as a result, a couple of hundred individuals create an effective network. In *The Tipping Point* Gladwell (2002) makes a strong case for 150 as the maximum number for effective communication. Beyond this number, face-to-face interaction becomes difficult.

An exploration of hierarchies and networks reveals that both systems are valuable in an organization, and leaders should investigate ways to integrate the benefits of both systems by creating permeable boundaries in their organizations (Ashkenas et al., 2002; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Leavitt, 2005).

Permeable Boundaries

The literature has not suggested that hierarchies be abandoned for networks, but rather that the boundaries in hierarchies become more permeable and flexible, similar to those in a network (Ashkenas et al., 2002; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Jones et al., 2006). Instead of assuming that hierarchies will go away, Ashkenas et al. propose “asking a new question about them. . . . [The question is] not how to eliminate hierarchies but how to have healthy hierarchies, structures that meet the success requirements of organizations for the twenty-first century: speed, flexibility, innovation, and integration” (p. 42).

To achieve permeable boundaries, organizations can create “contact architecture” (Perkins, 2003, p. 37) and encourage leaders, individuals, and teams to become “partners in creation” (Oshry, 1995, p. 67). These actions will initiate networks, foster information sharing, and support relationships. *Contact architecture* refers to structures in an organization that support connections (Perkins, 2003) that enable contact up and down,

face to face, side to side, and electronically. Contact architecture ensures that information is accessible, and collaboration occurs through the connections. This structure will enable “ideas, information, and resources [to] flow freely up and down, in and out, and across the organization” (Ashkenas et al., 2002, p. xix). Once effective contact structures are developed, all members of an organization can bring their “unique experiences, knowledge and skills—to become co-creators of the system” (Oshry, 1995, pp. 67-68). Ultimately, this will enable an organization to be more responsive to changes (Ashkenas et al., 2002; Ostroff, 1999; Wheatley, 2006).

Oshry (1995), Ostroff (1999), and Leavitt (2005) recognize that there will always be people who have specialties and there will always be leaders and followers. They suggested that organizations create methods to share certain common elements across the organization, which include developing a shared vision, sharing information regularly about areas of responsibility, fostering coaching relationships across levels, and creating opportunities to see and understand the experiences of other people’s responsibilities. Oshry’s ideas parallel those of Kikoski and Kikoski (2004) and Wheatley (2006) in that he suggests that teams and individuals should collaborate with each other when they are presented with new responsibilities. Collaboration will create new information and release creative ideas in the organization.

Oshry’s (1995) analogy of an organizational ballet illustrates the value of permeable boundaries. At the beginning of the ballet the dancers explore dance moves, how they can work together, and how they can work in groups and individually. Slowly, different groups create and perfect their own dances. From there they go back and start looking with curiosity at the dances of the other groups. They show off each of their

dances, and they coach each other on how to make each other's dances better. Then they come together and learn each other's dances. As a result, "the ballet ends in an explosive burst of individuality and commonality, difference and oneness" (p. 198).

Ashkenas et al. (2002) and Leavitt (2005) would approve of this analogy because it illustrates an organization that has boundaries, but all members cross over these boundaries, share information, and create a final product together. For organizations to share information and work across horizontal and vertical boundaries, they need to develop strategies to increase information flow throughout the organization. Dialogue is a strategy that can assist organizations in sharing information and learning across boundaries.

Dialogue

The following section provides an overview of dialogue. I describe and compare it to other forms of communication in organizations using current literature, demonstrate how different levels of communication in organizations differ from dialogue, and finish the section with a reflection on why organizations need to make operational changes to stay competitive in the 21st century and how dialogue can support organizations in these changes.

Dialogue is a form of conversation in which the participants develop a shared understanding of a topic. It is an exchange and appreciation of perspectives and involves two or more individuals. The participants explore the differences in their understanding of a topic through inquiry and together develop a concept about a specific topic. Dialogue enables the participants to learn from each other and clarify what they want to accomplish. The outcome of dialogue is the creation of new ideas and perspectives

(Bohm & Nichol, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004). Isaacs considers dialogue “a conversation with a centre, not sides; [it] is a flow of meaning” (p. 19).

Dialogue assists in the communication of complex issues. Community groups use dialogue to help the community come together and explore the root of problems (Gerard & Ellinor, 2000; Schein, 1993). Kahane (2004) uses dialogue to help political leaders understand situations charged with conflict. Schein (1993) states, “Proponents of dialogue claim that it holds promise as a way of helping groups reach higher levels of consciousness and thus be more creative and more effective” (p. 40).

The Path to Dialogue in Organizations

Bohm and Nichol (1996) define *communicating* as making something common, “convey[ing] information or knowledge from one person to another in as accurate a way as possible” (p. 2). All communication consists of talking and listening (Bohm & Nichol, 1996; Gayeski, 2005; Keyton, 2005). Miller and Miller (1997) explain that “the outcome of a conversation varies significantly depending on the talking and listening styles you use in the exchange” (p. 7) and that each form of communication has different types of talking and listening. Organizations have many forms of oral communication, including information sharing, the provision of direction, discussion, conflict resolution, reflective conversations, and dialogue. To understand how the concept of dialogue differs from other forms of communication and to appreciate the processes of achieving dialogue, it is helpful to explore different forms of communication in an organization.

One of the main purposes of communication in an organization is to pass on information and accomplish tasks. Miller and Miller (1997) identify this type of communication as “shop talk” and “control talk” (p. 8). These interactions take place

throughout the workday; they are polite, pleasant, and informative (Gayeski, 2005; Jones et al., 2006; Miller & Miller, 1997). The purpose of talking and listening in day-to-day communication is to give and receive information or direction. Isaacs (1999) refers to this form of communication as “politeness” (p. 261) and suggests that established norms of behaviour characterize the interaction.

Discussion is commonplace in organizations. Individuals use discussion to present and defend ideas to make a decision. The term *individual* is important in the description of discussion because the characteristic of the concept is thinking alone. Ideas are analyzed, broken into pieces, and assessed in discussions. There is a sense of winning and losing in discussions. One participant in the discussion may win because his or her idea, perspective, or view will surface as the best (Bohm & Nichol, 1996; Isaacs, 1999). Because of the nature of discussion, talking takes the form of presenting a defensible argument, which implies that in discussion the speaker attempts to influence the other participants. Dialogue, on the other hand, assists people in understanding other points of view. The approach to listening in discussions is tactical: Individuals listen for what they expect to hear and make judgments throughout the interaction (Kahane, 2004). Even though discussion is a valuable and effective process for day-to-day decision making in an organization, it does not generate new ideas and concepts to address complex situations (Bohm & Nichol, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Kahane, 2004). Discussion brings individuals to a comfort level at which they can say what they think, which is an important step toward dialogue (Isaacs, 1999).

Another form of communication in organizations is conflict resolution, sometimes referred to as “difficult conversations” (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999, p. xv). Stone et al.,

Miller and Miller (1997), and Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler (2002) propose that to effectively resolve conflicts, individuals need to take ownership of their role in the conflict and understand their thoughts, feelings, and contributions to the situation. In this type of communication, the elements of the situation are broken down and attended to individually to make sense of individual responsibility (Miller & Miller, 1997; Patterson et al., 2002; Stone et al., 1999). To resolve conflict successfully, individuals talk about their perspective and use “attentive” (Miller & Miller, 1997, p. 27) listening skills, which include fully attending to each other, paraphrasing for clarity, asking for more information, and acknowledging the speaker’s experiences (Miller & Miller, 1997; Stone et al., 1999). This type of communication is the beginning of reflective and inquiry-based communication, which helps to address complex situations (Bohm & Nichol, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004).

Conversations that focus on inquiry are a sophisticated form of communication that enables a “spirit of *curiosity*” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 272). For inquiry to be effective, the participants must be prepared to listen to be able to ask questions and reflect on the responses to understand the heart of the issues. They must be able to develop a sense of awareness of viewpoints about the issue and begin to own the ideas rather than react to them. There is no requirement for a response in inquiry conversations; the intent of the process is to gain, process, and consider information (Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004; Patterson et al., 2002; Short, 1998). Short identifies this type of conversation as “mutual inquiry” (p. 67) and indicated that when two people engage in a conversation of curiosity, they share the ownership of the issue. Isaacs calls this form of communication “reflective

dialogue” (p. 261), a process that is important but does not yet allow a flow of meaning because individuals still hold assumptions.

A significant amount of literature has suggested that dialogue occurs through communication focused on inquiry (Miller & Miller, 1997; Patterson et al., 2002; Stone et al., 1999). Although inquiry is a large part of dialogue, Bohm and Nichol (1996), Isaacs (1999), and Kikoski and Kikoski (2004) would argue that communication through inquiry is not dialogue because it falls short of suspending assumptions and creating new ideas by thinking together. According to Schein (1993):

dialogue focuses on getting in touch with underlying assumptions (especially our own assumptions) that automatically determine when we choose to speak and what we choose to say. Dialogue is focused more on the thinking process and how our perceptions and cognitions are preformed by our past experiences. (p. 43)

Short (1998) would connect “mutual inquiry” (p. 67) to Schein’s comments, which indicates that it is the process of surfacing assumptions and perceptions.

Bohm and Nichol (1996) recommend that, to succeed in dialogue, the participants become aware of feelings and emotions attached to their thinking and ideas to assist them in suspending their assumptions and judgments. They assert that the backgrounds and cultures of individuals influence responses to the ideas and thinking of others. Isaacs (1999) encourages individuals to be conscious of how they react and act upon the ideas of others, a very difficult task for human beings. Bohm and Nichol, as well as Isaacs, suggest that to suspend assumptions and judgments, it is necessary that the participants in dialogue practice seeing their assumptions and judgments from different points of view, all of which is consistent with mutual inquiry (Short, 1998).

Schein (1993) proposes that “an important goal of dialogue is 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. 43). Isaacs (1999) and Kahane (2004) elaborate on this idea in their statement that dialogue results in a group understanding, learning, and listening as a collective whole. To develop shared meaning as a collective whole, Kikoski and Kikoski (2004) and Isaacs imply that the essential components of dialogue are listening and reflecting. For dialogue to work, the participants must be able to listen “without prejudice, and without trying to influence each other” (Bohm & Nichol, 1996, p. 3).

Individuals in organizations spend a significant portion of time in discussions that, by their nature, revolve around each participant’s presenting and defending his or her ideas (Bohm & Nichol, 1996; Isaacs, 1999). As a result, when groups engage in dialogue, they need to make a conscious effort to suspend judgement, identify assumptions, and generate ideas together (Gerard & Ellinor, 2000; Schein, 1993). Isaacs refers to this state of dialogue as “generative” (p. 261).

The Use of Dialogue

As technology and the needs of society change, organizations recognize the need to shift their way of operating to remain successful (Kahane, 2004; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004; Wenger, 1998; Wheatley, 2006). The changes in operation include a greater emphasis on systems thinking, shared leadership, knowledge creation, and collaboration (Gerard & Ellinor, 2000; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004). Gerard and Ellinor emphasize that dialogue can play a key role in an organization’s ability to adopt new approaches to

operations and responsibilities because “it focuses on how diverse perspectives and interests within a system relate to each other” (¶ 4).

Leaders are recognizing that overcoming the challenges of the 21st century requires access to the knowledge of the entire organization (Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Wenger, 1998; Wheatley, 2006). When leaders tap into the knowledge of the entire organization, they enable the organization to adapt to changes in the economy and environment (Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004). Bohm and Nichol (1996), Isaacs (1999), and Schein (1993) support dialogue as offering a means to tap into knowledge creation in organizations. Isaacs, Kahane, and Schein provide multiple examples that demonstrate the use of dialogue to access the knowledge of employees, community members, and political leaders and the use of that knowledge to address complex issues. They recognize that dialogue needs to involve many members of a community, take place on a recurring basis, and occur before a situation becomes critical. Patterson et al. (2002) concludes that when group members develop shared meaning through dialogue, they own the issue and are willing to act on decisions that come out of that process. This sense of ownership by employees in an organization offers a powerful way to address the challenges present in this century (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

As I have read and reflected on the concepts of dialogue that authors such as Bohm and Nichol (1996), Isaacs (1999), and Kahane (2004) have presented, I recognize that dialogue requires a commitment of time and energy from a group. At the Ministry of Education I have not seen time set aside for dialogue. Group communication takes the form of discussions, or employees receive information electronically or from a presentation. I do not see the organization developing shared understanding about

education topics. The ministry is responsible for programs that affect BC's society, including literacy, early learning, and health. These complex topics could benefit from dialogue. The arguments of Bohm and Nichol, Isaacs, Kahane, and Schein make it evident that organizations responsible for social programs should develop "a more open and participative way of addressing the immense challenges [they] face" (Kahane, 2004, p. 131). A commitment to dialogue may be a step in the right direction. For an organization to move to dialogue, its culture needs to be ready for this change in practice.

Organizational Culture

Experts in the field of organizational culture have recognized that culture is difficult to define (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002; Keyton, 2005; Schein, 1992). Culture continually evolves and is interwoven with change in an organization. In this section I define organizational culture and discuss the literature on creating culture in an organization and the influence that societal values have on the development of organizational culture. Throughout this section I relate the concepts of organizational culture to communication.

Definition

Bolman, Deal, and NetLibrary, Inc. (2000) identify culture as an organization's collectively accepted way of operating that is developed and solidified over the course of its history. Kotter (1996) and Beck (1999) elaborate that shared values shape behaviour in an organization and influence the way the organization's members operate. In the public sector, societal values, including the hierarchal organizational structure, have a long-term influence on culture.

Schein (1992) defines artifacts, espoused values, and assumptions as the three levels of culture, which can be illustrated by using examples from the Ministry of Education. Artifacts are observable “organizational structures and processes” (p. 17), which can include the environment, language, rituals, and celebrations. In the ministry, hierarchal structures and processes are embedded in the organization’s internal communication strategies. For example, in a recent reorganization the leaders appeared to follow a very structured communication strategy. The assistant deputy ministers held meetings with their directors to discuss the reorganization. Once the decisions were made, first, the directors informed the affected managers and then managers informed the affected staff. Once the deputy had shared the information with the appropriate individuals, he made a ministry-wide announcement. This is an observable organizational process.

Espoused values are the “strategies, goals and philosophies” (Schein, 1992, p. 17) of the organization. They are difficult to discern, but they reveal themselves in the behaviours of the members of the organization. The fundamental goal of the ministry is to improve the life chances of all children in the province of BC through the education system. Over the past 10 years I have seen a movement toward greater consultation and interaction across our boundaries with educators in the field to ensure that the ministry’s policies and procedures align with practices in schools and districts. From this observation it appears that consultation and cooperation are values that are becoming embedded in the organizational culture.

Assumptions are “unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings” (Schein, 1992, p. 17) that guide the behaviour of the collective group. It is

difficult to provide an example of assumptions that staff in the ministry collectively hold because, as the definition indicates, assumptions are unconscious; they are not documented. In this regard I can only provide an example of my assumptions. Sometimes I think that it is inappropriate for me to directly approach a staff member in a different branch if I do not know that person. For example, recently I sought information on a project in another branch, and I approached the director rather than the staff person because I thought that the director could then direct me to a person who might have time to assist me in my request. If several staff operate in this manner, this would represent Schein's ideas about assumptions guiding the behaviour of the collective group.

Other authors support the concept of artifacts, espoused values, and assumptions within an organizational culture, and these levels are often the central focus of the literature on culture (Bolman et al., 2000; Harris & Ogbonna, 2002; Keyton, 2005). All of these elements become the "symbolic glue" (Bolman et al., 2000, p. 165) that creates organizational culture.

Creating Culture

The concept and the study of organizational culture has been evolving for the last three decades (Detert, Schroeder, & Mauriel, 2000); however, culture in organizations has been created, has evolved, and has been sustained for a much longer period of time. Beck (1999) and Cowan and Todorovic (2000) contend that organizational culture is influenced by societal values. Every organization has a culture, and all cultures are in different stages of development depending on the age of the organization (Schein, 1992). Some of the literature suggests that the founder establishes the culture, evolves that culture through midlife, and injects change into the culture as the organization matures

(Bechtold, 1997; Kotter, 1996; Schein, 1992). Other literature implies that the interactions of the members of the organization create the culture (Bate, Khan, & Pye, 2000; Bolman et al., 2000; Keyton, 2005; Sackmann & Phillips, 2004). In this section I examine the influences of society, leaders, and individuals on organizational culture and relate it to cross-boundary communication.

Influence of Society

Beck (1999) and Cowan and Todorovic (2000) explore how the values of society change through time and how value systems impact organizational productivity and strategies. Their concepts of value systems can be applied to explain how societal values influence the development of culture in an organization. By considering the concept of deep values, it is possible to appreciate the big-picture systems that impact culture in organizations.

Beck (1999) and Cowan and Todorovic (2000) present the idea that societies evolve through a series of value systems. The first three levels of societal evolution focus on values that enable survival, create safety, and result in power. The middle three levels focus on the values of honesty, success, and community. These levels are, respectively, the blue, orange, and green zones of the value system. The two upper levels of social evolution focus on values such as the interconnections between different environments, sustainability, and responsibility for all beings (Cowan & Todorovic, 2000). Beck draws attention to how the middle levels—blue, orange, and green—represent historical approaches to productivity.

Using Beck's (1999) illustrations of productivity, I applied the concepts to the development of culture related to communication in a public-sector organization. The

blue zone indicates society's doing things the right way (Beck, 1999) and resembles the traditional culture of the hierarchy in which productivity focused on efforts that were defined by job functions, authority, and levels of responsibility. Beck implies that in this environment "groups lacked the mandate to cross over functional, departmental, and even geographic lines" (Orange Zone Productivity: Strategy and Bottom-Lines section, ¶ 1). From my experience, this is the culture that the leaders in the public service are working to dissuade. In the Ministry of Education, leaders are encouraging staff to work beyond their job descriptions and to cut across boundaries to work and communicate with colleagues in other divisions and branches through collaborative efforts.

The orange zone is a cultural period in which an organization is focused on the bottom line. It is characterized by cost cutting and limited expenditures on resources (Beck, 1999). In my experience in the Ministry of Education, I have seen this culture evolve when a new government wins an election and identifies staff reduction as a cost-cutting measure. As I reported in chapter one, this occurred in the BC public sector in 1996 and in 2002. The new culture in 2002 resulted in the mistrust of leaders and staff focused on personal survival. The report of the BC Government, Office of the Auditor General (2005) indicates that in this type of climate, employees become uncomfortable in questioning policies or practice with senior managers. They will communicate concerns to their co-workers or immediate supervisors but fear that they will be criticized or penalized if they communicate these ideas to senior managers, which illustrates that they are "uncomfortable challenging the status quo" (p. 7).

In the green zone the organization focuses on "people—their competencies, feelings, experiences humanistic work site needs and even personal preferences" (Beck,

1999, Green Zone Productivity: Sensitivity to People section, ¶ 2). This is the zone in which I have found myself in my workplace for the last two years. I have been supported in pursuing my master's degree and have been offered my choice of two different positions in the organization. The leaders are spending time considering staff engagement, asking staff how they prefer to be recognized, inquiring about what type of work environment employees need to be productive, and promoting cross-boundary work opportunities. I hear colleagues say that staff are becoming more enthusiastic, social, and engaged than they have been in the past several years. Beck would agree that these are all elements of a culture in the green zone, because in this zone, "expansive career development tracts were funded. Barriers in the organizational structure were lowered as rank systems were discouraged, both in external displays and in personal relationships" (Green Zone Productivity: Sensitivity to People section, ¶ 3).

In relation to cross-boundary communication in the public sector a continual tension is created by the cycle of government between the three levels presented by Beck (1999) and Cowan and Todorovic (2000). The political system in democratic societies results in a change in political power every three to five years. Each new political party will flow through the levels of blue, orange and green. A new government rearranges the organizational structure of the public sector resulting in changing responsibilities and levels of authorities a period of reigning in budgets during this time cross-boundary communication diminishes (Beck, 1999). This is often followed by a period of cost cutting resulting in a retreat to the safety of organizational boundaries (Beck, 1999). As the political party settles into its role, attention is turned to the well-being of the workforce and the culture of the public sector enters the green zone of Beck's (1999)

value system. Considering this information, the culture of the public sector is forever susceptible to periods where cross-boundary communication will be embraced and when it will be closed down. Societal concepts can influence the culture of an organization; however, leaders can influence the culture of an organization.

Influence of Leaders

Leaders create culture through their actions and decisions (Bechtold, 1997; Kotter, 1996; Schein, 1992): their response to critical situations, their communication methods, the allocation of resources, their recognition of employees, and their recruitment of new staff. When employees observe the success of their leader's actions and decisions, cultural norms, values, and assumptions emerge (Schein, 1992). Leaders' creation of culture occurs in the public sector. For example, in the Ministry of Education the past deputy minister began to ask staff what they needed to make communication in the organization more fluid, and they recommended the use of video technology to help the deputy provide weekly updates on the executive meetings. The past deputy then produced a new weekly video clip for staff that became part of the organization's culture in that the staff look forward to the regular update. This example demonstrates a culture created by a leader at the top of the organization (Bechtold, 1997; Kotter, 1996; Schein, 1992).

Influence of Individuals

The actions and experiences of individuals create culture; without people, there could be no culture. Sackmann and Phillips (2004) and Keyton (2005) suggest that culture is socially constructed and developed through community interactions, which implies that leaders are not the only creators of culture. Keyton suggests that all roles

create culture through an “organic, emergent, and reflective process” (p. 143) that, according to Wheatley (2006) is consistent with the organic development of systems. These concepts mean that if a small group of people took it upon themselves to engage in a specific action such as dialogue, they would perturb the system. The outcome of such a perturbation is unpredictable and therefore organic. These actions may influence a change in the culture of internal dialogue.

Historically, leaders have created the culture of an organization, but in organizations today leaders are present at all levels (Bate et al., 2000) and do not necessarily hold a title, which results in the organic emergence of culture (Wheatley, 2006). If the leaders and the members of an organization create culture through interactions within the community, then all individuals in the organization have a role in creating its culture. Culture will be created throughout the lifetime of the organization and will evolve as societal values emerge (Beck, 1999; Keyton, 2005; Schein, 1992).

The purpose of this project was to research the concept of the benefit of cross-boundary conversations to the Ministry of Education. The concept of dialogue is a new idea that could change how the ministry shares information, values, and perspectives across its boundaries. It has the potential to help the organization shift from a culture of hierarchal boundaries to one of permeable boundaries that permit information and perspectives to be shared more easily. The concept of dialogue supports the emerging societal values of information sharing and greater staff engagement. The following chapter explains the research approach that I used to determine the benefits of dialogue to the ministry.

CHAPTER THREE – CONDUCT OF THE RESEARCH

Research Approach

In this project I used action research to explore the following research question: How can cross-boundary dialogue benefit staff at the Ministry of Education? This section describes my research approach. I explain why action research was an appropriate method for the purpose of my project; I outline the cross-boundary conversations sessions that I conducted to facilitate my investigation of dialogue in the organization; I follow with a description of my project participants and explain why I invited specific individuals to participate; I describe my research methods of reflective journals, interviews, and a focus group; and I indicate how I developed and tested the questions for these methods and how I analysed the data. I conclude the chapter by making a statement about how I have attended to the ethical issues related to my project.

Action research focuses on the stories and multiple perspectives of the participants (Glesne, 2006). The researcher engages with the participants to obtain data through a process of inquiry and reflection. This process includes methods and techniques that delve into the experiences of the participants to illuminate ideas, emotions, and perspectives as it “*gives voice* to participants who have previously been silent research subjects” (Stringer, 1999, p. 167).

I conducted my project using the cycles of action research—the routines of looking, thinking, and acting (Stringer, 1999). My research strategy included three cycles, and in each I facilitated a cross-boundary conversation, after each of which I collected data from reflective journals and interviews. At the end of each cycle I modified

the structure of the conversations and the reflective and interview questions based on my learning in each cycle. I concluded the three cycles with a focus group.

The principles of action research supported the intent of my project. These principles include relationships, communication, participation, and inclusion (Glesne, 2006; Stringer, 1999)—all elements that assist individuals in breaking down communication barriers between levels and departments in an organization (Isaacs, 1999; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004; Kouzes & Posner; 2002). Stringer suggested that one of the primary interests of an action researcher is to “establish and maintain positive working relationships” as well as “promote feelings of equality for all people involved” (p. 29). Based on Stringer’s ideas, I attempted to use strategies that promoted and supported the development of relationships each time the participants interacted in the research process.

I used a qualitative-research approach for this project. Through action research, this approach takes into account the ability of individuals to create meaning from their experiences (Palys, 2003). Humans are “cognitive beings who actively perceive and make sense of the world around them [and] . . . ascribe meaning to their behaviour and the world around them” (p. 9). The focus of this research was on developing an understanding of the perceptions of individuals on how cross-boundary conversations on BC’s education system could benefit communication across boundaries.

Cross-Boundary Conversation Sessions

To conduct my research, I facilitated three dialogue sessions focused on the topic of vulnerable students in the BC education system. Prior to the first dialogue session I hosted an introductory session to provide the participants with an overview of the project

and the purpose of the cross-boundary conversation sessions, and I gave the participants a document that outlined the research process (Appendix B).

The introductory session began with an activity that helped everyone to get to know each other and closed with the participants' selection of a picture that represented their interpretation of *vulnerability*. At the beginning of the introductory session I gave them a list of movies and book titles and asked them to pick a movie or a book that represented their life during the previous month. Each participant shared a story by relating it to the movie or the book. Following this activity, I explained how I would conduct the dialogue sessions, stated the ground rules on dialogue, and described the research process in relation to the dialogue sessions. I closed the session by asking each participant to select a picture on the table from the Visual Explorer (Palus & Horth, 2001) picture series that represented the term vulnerability to them personally or professionally. I collected the pictures and asked the participants to use this image to explore the question "What does the term *vulnerability* mean to me personally and in my work?" in the first cross-boundary conversation.

In the first conversation session I asked each participant to talk about the term vulnerability using the picture that he or she had selected in the introductory session, and they worked in groups of two and then four to discuss their pictures. I then pulled the entire group together to discuss the meaning of their pictures. This strategy helped them to become familiar with each other and gave each participant an opportunity to speak. The following two sessions built on the ideas and experiences of the first session with the pictures. In the second session the group explored why an understanding of vulnerability

was important in respect to their roles. The third session focused on the government's role related to vulnerable students.

Project Participants

This section describes the participants in the project. Because I designed this project to improve interactions throughout the organization, it was essential that the participants in the project come from various levels and departments. The content of the cross-boundary conversations focused on the topic of vulnerable children in the BC education system, a topic that impacts the work of many individuals in the organization. I invited participants from departments that focus on the content of education.

Given the timelines of this project, it was important that the scope of the research be manageable. I approached 11 individuals and asked them to participate. They were all interested in volunteering; in the end, 9 individuals were able to participate in the sessions. The schedules of the senior-executive invitees did not permit participation in any of the conversation sessions. The 9 participants were from different departments and represented different roles in the organization, including directors, technicians, education specialists, researchers, and managers. Three of the participants were unionized staff, three were field staff who worked at the ministry, and three were in formal leadership positions. The participants from the field had been with the ministry for less than three years, and all of the others had been with the ministry for over six years.

At the time of the research, the participants represented four of eight divisions and nine branches in the ministry. A technician from the union staff, an education specialist from the field, a manager, and a director represented the Governance and

Accountability Division. One education specialist from the field and one from the unionized staff represented the Partnerships and Planning Division, an education specialist from the field and a manager represented the Learning Management Division, and a research officer from the union staff represented the Knowledge Management and Education Sector.

I invited these individuals to participate for specific reasons. To engage staff with expertise and interest in the topic of vulnerable students, I asked individuals who played different roles to participate. The field staff brought the perspective of what is currently occurring in schools and school districts in relation to vulnerable students. The technicians, research officers, and education specialists represented points of view from the perspective of data and policy related to both public and independent schools. They were able to share ideas on how the ministry staff interpret data to create provincial policy. The managers and directors represented content areas and provided a bridge of understanding between the work of the staff and the influence of the executive.

People from across the organization have many opportunities to interact through, for example, social committee activities, healthy workplace activities, and all-staff meetings. As well, in the deputy information conversations, staff members present topics of interest to the participants. I wanted to explore the participants' experiences of a deep conversation about an education topic and relate this focused experience to cross-boundary communication. To make the experience of value to the participants, it was necessary to pull together a group who had expertise or interest in the content area to delve deeply into the discussion and to engage this group to allow them to gain valuable information and insights into the topic.

Ultimately, these individuals had a reason to participate, and I had a group of individuals with whom I could work who would experience a model of communication that the organization could promote and support.

Research Methods, Tools, and Conduct

The goal of my research project was to explore how cross-boundary dialogue could benefit the staff. The most logical data-collection tools, instruments, and organizational intervention to use in the project were strategies based on conversations or dialogue involving individuals across the organization from different levels and different departments. In this regard, my intervention was a series of three facilitated conversations. My data-collection methods included reflective exercises, informal interviews, and a focus group. The following sections describe my research and data-collection methods.

Question Development and Pilot Testing

I developed the questions for the reflective exercise, the interviews, and the focus group based on my research questions. Glesne (2006) recommended that researchers test their questions to ensure that they are a realistic reflection of the research topic and the information that the researcher is seeking to collect. Given the timelines of this project, I did not formally pilot-test the questions; rather, I tested the questions informally by posing them to friends.

Glesne (2006) suggested that it is critical that the respondents “not just answer your questions, but more important, that they reflect critically on the usability of your questions” (p. 86). After the first few interviews, I asked the respondents how I could improve the questions for the next interview and revised them accordingly.

Reflective Journals

MacKeracher (2004) supported the value of reflective practice and presented the adult learning cycles of Kolb and Taylor to demonstrate that, following a concrete experience, adults will gain more value from the experience if they take the time to engage in written reflection. Written reflection gives the adult learner the opportunity to make sense of the experience. Therefore, I thought that if my participants took time to reflect after each conversation session, they might develop a better understanding of the topic discussed and of the value of the experience of the conversation.

At the beginning of the research project I provided the participants with reflective journals and an overview of the purpose of the journal in the data-collection process. At the end of each conversation I sent a few reflective questions to the participants by electronic mail (Appendix C) and asked them to reflect on the questions and record their reflections. I collected the responses in the journals throughout the research process as the participants sent their responses by electronic mail or indicated that they had written some reflections. The responses in the journals informed the interview questions and the direction of the focus group.

Interviews

“Interviewing may be defined simply as a conversation with a purpose” (Berg, 2004, p. 75). Silverman (2004) suggested that the interview generates data about the social world when people talk about their lives: “Within the interview itself, the subject is fleshed out—rationally, emotionally, in combination, or otherwise—in relation to the give-and-take part of interviewing and the interview’s research purposes. The interview and its participants are constantly developing” (p. 150) in “special forms of

conversations” (p. 141) that are interactive and constructive. The purpose of my interviews was to gather the views and perspectives of staff about their experience in the cross-boundary conversations (Stringer, 1999). The strategy represented the type of interactive and constructive conversation that I was hoping to foster in the organization through this research.

I used a semistructured interview concept as my framework, but I conducted the interviews as informal conversations. Bernard (2000) suggested that semistructured interviews work well in a government setting in which respondents are continually pressed for time. Using this approach, I conducted the interviews based on an interview guide (Appendix D) of predetermined questions that I could expand on, reorder as needed, and probe during the interview (Berg, 2004). To achieve a sense of casual conversation, I was cognisant of the predetermined questions so that I would not have to refer to the list of questions in front of me during the conversation.

I conducted two rounds of interviews. In the first round I interviewed all nine participants and then conducted a set of clarifying conversations in which I delved deeper into the responses from the first set of interviews. The first set lasted no longer than 45 minutes and generally concluded after half an hour. Glesne (2006) proposed that “an hour of steady talk is generally an appropriate length before diminishing returns set in for both parties” (p. 88). The clarifying conversations took approximately 15 minutes.

Bernard (2000) recommended the use of a tape recorder to afford a permanent record of the interview. Although I knew that the use of recording equipment “provides a nearly complete record of what has been said and permits easy attention to the course of the interview” (p. 89), I chose not to use electronic equipment for several reasons. I

wanted to be able to conduct interviews that felt like conversations. I interviewed staff members who work at the same office location as I do and could easily access these individuals if I needed clarification on a point that they made in the interview. I considered myself experienced at listening for information in a conversation because in my work I go into the field and conduct interview-style discussions, take notes of those discussions, and develop formal public reports. I felt that this experience enabled me to take accurate notes in the interviews.

To gain the maximum amount of information from the interviews, it was imperative that I ensure the “establishment and maintenance of good rapport” (Berg, 2004, p. 99). At the beginning of the interview I asked some general social questions to put the participants at ease and to discover a little about their lives and their work. In this initial interaction I also shared something about my life and my work. As the interview ended I did not say a final good-bye; rather, I suggested that the door was open if they would like to return to share more information (Glesne, 2006).

Focus Groups

Berg (2004) identified the focus group as “an interview designed for small groups” (p. 123). “Focus groups are recruited to discuss a particular topic” (Bernard, 2000, p. 207). In my cyclical research process I conducted the focus group after the three cross-boundary conversations and interviews were completed. The purpose of the focus group was to discuss and deepen my understanding of the themes that emerged from the interviews and the reflective questions (Berg, 2004).

Berg (2004) and Silverman (2004) outlined some practical and strategic reasons to conduct focus groups. In a focus group the researcher can observe the interactions

among the participants and the participants can build upon ideas and themes of the discussion, which will potentially result in a richer understanding of the topic. Focus groups are an opportunity to collect a large amount of data in a very short period and to sample a large population. To manage the amount of data collected and to ensure that the discussion stays focused, Glesne (2006) suggested comprising a focus group of 6 to 10 participants. I invited all of my participants to take part in the focus group, but only 5 were available.

I conducted my two-hour focus group in a boardroom at the Ministry of Education during working hours for the convenience and comfort of the participants. Based on Berg's (2004) suggestions, the first activity of the session involved welcoming the participants and introducing the individuals who would assist me in the process. I then made a statement about confidentiality, informed the participants that they had the right to leave the session at any time, explained the purpose of the focus group, and answered the participants' questions. Volunteer colleagues recorded the responses to the focus group questions and the resulting discussions on flipchart paper and on the computer. I chose not to electronically record the session because of the difficulty of effectively capturing a variety of voices on a recorder in a large room (Glesne, 2006) and because my research group was not comfortable with the use of a recording device.

I facilitated the focus-group discussion using four questions (Appendix E) and probed with further questions as needed (Glesne, 2006). The four questions reflected the themes that emerged from the interview cycle of the research. At the end of each question I asked the participants to record the themes they heard in the discussion on a worksheet,

which I collected to verify my interpretation of the themes during the data analysis (Berg, 2004).

Data Analysis

“Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned” (Glesne, 2006, p. 147). It consists of reviewing the collected data, verifying the data, extracting and comparing themes, reflecting on the meaning of the themes, and developing a summary of the results using examples from the data that illuminate the concepts that arise from the results (Bernard, 2000). This section outlines the process that I used to analyse the data from the interviews, reflective journals, and focus group.

I collected the data for the interviews using pen and paper while listening to the responses of my participants and then transcribed my written notes into a Word document. Some participants wrote and submitted their reflections, and I copied their responses and returned their journals. Other participants sent their reflections through electronic mail. I collected the data for the focus groups on flipcharts and on a Word document on the computer and compared the flipchart information with the Word document created during the session.

Glesne (2006) cautioned researchers to create trustworthiness in their data by taking notice of the content of the data, which involves paying attention to what was and was not stated. In reviewing the data, I paid attention to my own biases and considered why I did not notice particular statements or comments. Trustworthiness is reliant on a sound relationship between the researcher and the participants. To demonstrate the trustworthiness of the data from the interviews, I gave the transcripts back to the

participants for verification. In the focus group I confirmed the content of the flipcharts with the participants by asking them to write on a worksheet the themes that they heard.

I analysed the data from the reflections, the interviews, and the focus group with the use of “thematic analysis, a process that involves coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description” (Glesne, 2006, p. 147). When I reviewed the interview responses, I was “reading and pawing through the data” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, Section 2, ¶ 4). As I gained skill and knowledge of the content, I identified subthemes. The themes emerged from repeated words, comparison and contrast of the responses, and a search for what was not stated (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Given that I was conducting research on a topic that is of interest to the deputy minister of the organization, I needed to consider the authenticity of the data, which speaks to the truth of the data. Because the respondents might not have been as open as they could have been because of their concern that the deputy minister would see the results of the research, at my introductory session and throughout the conversations and interviews I assured them that their responses would remain strictly confidential and anonymous. This was one of the ethical issues related to this project.

Ethical Issues

Action research occurs through interactions between participants and a researcher (Stringer, 1999). All research involving human subjects in Canada must be conducted in an ethical manner and abide by the eight ethical standards and procedures outlined in the policies of the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social

Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [Tri-Council], 1998). “Respect for human dignity [is] the cardinal principle of modern research ethics” (p. i.5). This principle ensures that researchers will respect and consider all interests of their participants. In this section I provide an overview of the seven remaining ethical principles and the procedures I used to ensure the ethical conduct of this project. I conclude with a statement on how the ethical principles applied to my research project.

The two principles that had the most obvious impact on my work relate to consent and confidentiality (Tri-Council, 1998). A researcher needs to ensure that the participants are aware of all aspects of the study to make an informed decision to participate. This includes informing the participants that their involvement is voluntary, their well-being will not be threatened, and their withdrawal from participation at any time during the study is acceptable (Glesne, 2006). The researcher needs to ensure that all personal information about the participants will remain confidential and that any information that they provide will remain anonymous. To ensure that I upheld the principles of consent and confidentiality in my research project, in my letter of invitation to the participants (Appendix F) I explained the use of consent forms and assured them that I would respect their confidentiality. I developed and used written consent forms (Appendix G) and reported on themes and concepts rather than specific responses.

Three principles relate to harms and benefits (Tri-Council, 1998): “balancing harms and benefits, minimizing harm and maximizing benefits” (p. i.6). The researcher must consider these principles with respect to the organization in which the research is taking place and the participants who are engaging in the action-research activities. The researcher must balance harms and benefits to ensure that the study will benefit the

organization and not harm the “reputations of the organizations or individuals in public life” (p. i.6). The research process must not expose the volunteers to unnecessary risk or require an excessive number of participants, and the researcher should involve only enough participants to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. Finally, the purpose and processes of the research should maximize the benefit to the community and “generate knowledge that will help produce some social good” (Palys, 2003, p. 83). I took care to connect regularly with my sponsor and participants and ensure that my processes and procedures were not causing harm to the reputations of the organization or individuals. Through this regular connection I made certain that my research continued to benefit the organization and the individuals involved.

The remaining two principles are respect for vulnerable persons and respect for justice and inclusiveness (Tri-Council, 1998). If I had engaged a vulnerable individual in my study, I would have needed to consider “special procedures to protect their interests” (p. i.5). However, this principle relates to children and individuals in care, and I did not need to involve children or individuals in care in my research.

The principle of justice and inclusiveness relates to “fair methods, standards and procedures for reviewing research protocols” (Tri-Council, 1998, p. i.6). To support this principle, I submitted my proposal to the Royal Roads University Ethics Committee for review and approval. My organization did not require an ethics review.

The ethical principles that had the greatest impact on my research were consent, confidentiality, harms, and benefits. My research involved individuals within my organization who were adults capable of making an informed decision to participate. To inform them about privacy, confidentiality, harms, and benefits, I gave them a

comprehensive and transparent overview of the purpose, goals, and intent of the project. It was important that I represent the voices of the participants and ensure that my biases would not dominate the documentation. I also gave the participants summaries of the themes and concepts derived from the data-gathering stages of the project and informed them that they would have the opportunity to review the major project paper to provide feedback. These actions, along with the ethical review process, ensured that my project upheld the required ethical standards of action research.

I paid attention to two central ethical issues that involved my sponsor, the deputy minister. Because some of my conversations with the deputy might have provided me with information on unofficial policies or programs, I ensured the confidentiality of these conversations in both my written documents and my discussions with staff as I engaged in the research process (Block, 2000). Second, when one has the sponsorship of a person in authority, others may feel obligated to participate in activities in which they would not normally engage. It would be very easy for a researcher to use the authority of the sponsor to influence staff to become engaged in the research activities. Ethically as the researcher, I worked to ensure that the participants in the research process engaged because of their genuine interest in and support of the project's concepts and objectives (Block, 2000).

Equipped with knowledge about the principles of action research, a confirmed group of project participants, and an awareness of ethical issues related to action research I proceeded to conduct the data collection for this project. This chapter outlined the rational and process that I used for data collection about the benefits of cross-boundary

dialogue at the Ministry of Education. The following chapter provides a detailed presentation and analysis of the data collected for my research project.

CHAPTER FOUR – PROJECT RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

My research focused on the following question: How can cross-boundary dialogue benefit the Ministry of Education? I also explored the following subquestions: (a) What is dialogue? (b) what does it mean to cross boundaries in a hierarchy? and (c) what do staff need to engage in cross-boundary dialogue? Following a series of dialogue sessions, I gathered data through reflective journals, interviews, and a focus group to answer these questions.

This chapter presents the findings and conclusions of the data collection from this study of cross-boundary dialogue on vulnerable students. I present the thoughts and words of the participants using pseudonyms that I created from the font style I used to code the interview data. The nine participants are employees of the Ministry of Education, and their pseudonym names were Arial, Garamond, Batang, Georgia, Raavi, Tahoma, Tunga, Verdana, and Latha. Following an examination of the findings, I discuss my conclusions from the data analysis and close the chapter with an overview of the scope and limitations of the research.

Study Findings

In this section I explain the three major themes and the related subthemes that emerged through the analysis of the data. The first theme relates to the professional and organizational value of dialogue. I discuss the benefit to the participants of the experience of the cross-boundary conversations, which helped them to gain different perspectives on vulnerable students. I continue this theme by identifying how this experience addressed a longer-term rather than an urgent topic. The second theme focuses on participation in dialogue; it explores the factors that would entice participants to continue their

involvement in cross-boundary conversations. Some of the factors include the topic; consideration of executive support and participation; and the participant selection process. The final theme is the structure of successful cross-boundary dialogue. The structure includes the dedication of time to the sessions, the opportunity for interaction among the participants, and the organization of the sessions by a dedicated facilitator.

Value of Dialogue

Throughout the conversation sessions and interviews, the participants indicated that they enjoyed the experience. Batang felt “liberated, refreshed” after the conversations; Arial felt “connected”; Raavi said the experience was “neither awkward nor uncomfortable; it was curious and engaging.” Garamond was pleased to participate because it was “an opportunity to meet others you do not work with. I am not out there connecting with people all the time; this was a good opportunity for me.” Four of the participants suggested that employees need to have this type of conversation more often. When I asked the participants why they enjoyed the experience, they responded that it was an opportunity to gain the perspectives of others.

Perspective. All nine participants reported that the value of the cross-boundary conversation experience was the opportunity to learn and explore the perspectives of the other participants. Their comments helped me to understand what they did with the new perspectives they gained in this experience. Arial told me:

When I hear different perspectives, it helps me deal with things in a more informed way. I now think of vulnerable students in my content area in a different way. I become more engaged in my work; this experience gives me more knowledge.

Arial explained that talking with the other participants about vulnerability had helped to develop new ideas about curriculum. Arial experienced a similar phenomenon when the curriculum department engaged in a conversation with the literacy department. By speaking with the literacy staff, the curriculum staff were able to fine-tune their ideas on what needed to be part of the language arts curriculum.

My experience was similar to Arial's in that in November I was working on materials related to the ministry-funded programs that allow students to travel to Ottawa or another city in the country for weeklong student conferences. Because of the conversations on vulnerable students, I began to question whether vulnerable students have had the opportunity to participate in these programs. As I begin to interact with the coordinators of these programs, I wonder whether they can give me an example of a vulnerable child who has taken part in one of the programs.

Tunga and Batang affirmed that it is valuable to have new perspectives to add to their personal perspectives. Batang said, "It changes or validates what I think; it strengthens my ideas or position. I use the information internally." Verdana and Latha noted that the cross-boundary conversation experience has helped them to connect their work to the work of others, and Tahoma declared that several days later she was still thinking about the ideas she heard in the conversations.

Important vs. urgent topics. The participants implied in their responses to the interview and focus group questions that this concept could be a forum to talk across boundaries to enhance the organization's two-way communication about important issues. The majority of the participants indicated that the experience of the three conversation sessions was different from that of most group discussions. Generally,

people come together once with the task of solving an urgent problem. Batang described the cross-boundary conversation experience as “exploring ideas together,” and Garamond suggested that it was an opportunity to “get broader perspectives,” and it was “not about solving a problem.” As Georgia stated, “For me, this experience was about shared values and a sense of community [around the topic]. This concept has real possibility to focus on important, rather than just urgent, topics.”

My data reveal that the benefit of cross-boundary dialogue to the ministry is that it enables staff to discuss important long-term issues related to education and to develop new perspectives as a group. In the Study Conclusions section I illustrate how the literature supports the value of cross-boundary perspectives and community dialogue on complex issues.

Participation in Dialogue

The main themes that emerged in the data related to participation in cross-boundary dialogue were the topics; executive support and participation; and the participant selection processes.

Topic. When I asked what would encourage the participants to attend conversation sessions, the first words that my colleagues suggested were *good topics*. It was important to the participants that they be interested in the topic and feel that they have something to contribute to the conversation. Garamond stated, “I contribute based on how well I know the subject,” and Tahoma added, “If I am confident about a topic, I will speak more.” The participants indicated that the topic of the cross-boundary conversations was of interest to them personally and professionally, and they suggested that if they were interested in the topic, they would make a personal commitment to

participate. The focus group participants suggested that if the conversations were to continue, the staff and executive could choose topics. As Raavi suggested, “Topics could originate from senior management, or they could come up through the organization.”

Executive support and participation. When I asked the focus group participants what they would require to keep coming to cross-boundary conversations, they all agreed with Georgia’s statement of “purpose, results, influence.” They wanted to have genuine conversations that have a purpose, an outcome, and the ability to influence a change. The participants felt that, to influence the system, they needed support from the executive for the purpose of the dialogue and the topic of discussion. They were concerned that the executive might not endorse topics that were not part of the political agenda. Arial stated in an interview, “To move to action, we need senior executive endorsement to act on ideas; then one can move forward.” There was a sense of agreement that the executive could demonstrate their support for a cross-boundary conversation series by participating in an introductory meeting to show their commitment and joining a final meeting to hear the perspectives developed in the dialogue and thank people for their time and participation.

The participants implied the need for executive support of this concept; however, they had mixed feelings about executive participation. Several times they implied that if the executive had attended the cross-boundary conversations, the dialogue would not have been as open. In an interview Batang asserted that the presence of the executive “shuts down the openness, but I do not think in our organization it is out of fear; rather, it is just not our culture.” Garamond stated that he might be inclined to speak out if he “was invited to express his opinion.” I observed all of the focus group participants nodding and

smiling when Raavi said, “When executive members are part of a conversation, the participants talk to the chair.” If the executive were to participate, Tahoma indicated that “they must be fully committed and attend most of the sessions.”

An examination of the participants’ responses to the interview and focus group questions about vertical communication illustrates some of the unease related to executive participation. During the focus group the participants noted that reporting relationships might influence or alter a conversation. In this group no participant held a reporting relationship with another participant.

In the interviews there was a sense that the staff were comfortable in talking with their direct reports, but less comfortable in talking with the executive. Garamond stated, “I am comfortable talking to my direct report or one above; however, I may not feel it is appropriate to talk about certain issues with individuals higher up.” Batang said, “I will go higher up if I need information, although sometimes I hesitate.” Georgia acknowledged, “I do not want to bother others in the vertical with my ideas, so I tag stuff onto what is already happening.”

Verdana had a different point of view: “My role makes it easy for me to get answers and ask questions. When I need information, I go get it from whomever.” Arial’s comments offer a good summary of vertical communication:

I am comfortable talking with my direct report because I have more time with that person; therefore, they know I can speak to both sides of an issue. With senior executive I do not spend enough time with them for them to see that I can do both sides.

Participant selection. The data from the interviews and the focus group reveal the importance of participant diversity. However, there were differing ideas on participant

selection. Latha found “the mix of people . . . beneficial,” and in the focus group they agreed unanimously when Garamond suggested that participants be drawn “from different job functions.” Garamond liked the idea of randomly choosing groups because it “got people out of their cubicles to meet others from different areas.” He explained that a facilitator could draw names from different branches to select participants, which he called *random selection*.

Georgia proposed that a staff member suggest a topic to the executive for their endorsement, and then that staff member could select and invite participants. I informed them that I would call this *purposeful selection*. The participants in the focus group questioned the need for expertise in the dialogue; however, the data do not reveal whether the participants felt strongly about including content experts in the dialogue. Raavi suggested, “As a participant you have to have a certain amount of content knowledge, and in some cases the group may need outside experts.” Conversely, in an interview Garamond thought that it would be interesting, although a little uncomfortable, to participate in a dialogue not knowing anything about the content. He suggested that the experts could learn from the others, who may offer unique perspectives.

My data reveal three factors in relation to participation in dialogue. Staff will participate in this type of activity if the topic is of interest to them or relevant to their work. I sensed that the staff would like the executive to grant permission to them to participate by endorsing the concept and the topic. I do not have enough data to determine whether these sessions would benefit from executive participation and recommend this as an area of further research in chapter five. Finally, an organization consists of individuals with different personalities and ways of operating; therefore,

facilitators should use different participant selection and solicitation methods in planning cross-boundary dialogue sessions. In the Study Conclusions section I illustrate how the literature supports these conclusions.

Structure for Success

The data from the interviews and focus groups reveal that a structure is necessary for the success of cross-boundary conversations. This includes dedicated time, positive interaction among the participants, and facilitation of the sessions.

Time. According to Latha, “We need a structure to make this happen and a personal commitment,” and Arial pointed out that it would be helpful to have “scheduled meetings with a beginning and an end. Make it very clear what we are getting into and what the commitment is.” Raavi supported the idea of dedicating time to this type of activity: “Time needs to be committed if we are to have deep dialogue.”

Positive interaction. The participants indicated that the cross-boundary conversation concept worked well because of the interactions and relationships in the group. Garamond stated that the conversations involved a “good interplay between people. No one seemed to do all the talking; everybody seemed to speak their mind.” In a follow-up interview, Batang recalled that, as the facilitator, I ensured that everyone had a chance to speak. For example, at the end of one session I offered Tahoma, who had said very little in the session, the opportunity to talk. In the interviews the participants told me that in the cross-boundary conversation they respected each other, spoke honestly and openly about their thoughts, and were comfortable in the experience because they knew each other. A couple of individuals mentioned that they did not know all of the participants at the beginning, and, as a result, they were a little uneasy; however, as they

became involved in the conversation, they felt welcomed, respected, and, ultimately, comfortable.

The participants agreed that the cross-boundary conversations were successful because they were facilitated interactions rather than presentations. Arial suggested that these conversations were built on a “model of interaction. It was a group process that was done well,” and Georgia added that “interaction is a lot richer” than simply receiving information in a lecture style. I observed all of the focus group participants nodding in agreement when Arial commented that he felt that the introductory picture activity was “action oriented and creative, resulting in an experience that had synergy and momentum.” Georgia elaborated on these comments: “Reflecting on each other’s pictures was a safe way to get into a discussion. There was no win or lose.” Tahoma “liked the one-on-one, two-on-two, and four-on-four picture activity.” I described this activity in chapter three. In their interviews Garamond and Batang echoed her comments. Verdana stated, “It worked well because we practiced sharing our ideas in small groups before engaging with the larger group.”

The participants agreed the dialogue was a collective process in which they built on each other’s ideas. In an interview Arial referred to this as “skating off each other’s ideas.” Tahoma summed up the nature of the conversation sessions as “a casual, relaxed discussion where everyone was participating.” Tunga, Georgia, and Arial elaborated on this description by stating that there was no hierarchy in the discussions. The participants pointed out that the discussion was not about scoring points, defending a position, or showing off. The participants shared their knowledge about and experience with

vulnerable students and developed new ideas and awareness of vulnerability that could help them in their roles.

Facilitation. The participants found it helpful to have a facilitator in these sessions to provide structure and direction. In the focus group Garamond contended that difficult personality types would affect the success of a dialogue, but Georgia pointed out that the facilitator could resolve this if it was an issue. A participant in the focus group made a significant, unprompted point about the value of talking with the facilitator as a form of reflection. The participants found it difficult to make time to write reflections in their learning journals. In chapter six I will discuss the limited information that I received from the journals. Garamond noted that the one-on-one interviews provided a structured time for reflection. Raavi agreed with Garamond's comment and said the interview "provided more time to process and clarify thoughts and ideas." I observed the other participants nodding in agreement with these statements.

My data reveal three factors in relation to the structure of dialogue. For successful dialogue to occur, the participants clearly indicated that they must have time set aside during the work day to engage in deep conversation. Dialogue will have a greater chance of success if the participants feel respected and the environment enables rich interactions. Finally, the participants appreciated that I facilitated the sessions and set the stage for deep dialogue by effectively using group process strategies. In the Study Conclusions section I illustrate how the literature supports these three concepts.

Study Conclusions

Upon completion of the data analysis, it became evident that the data reveal information about the main research question, How can cross-boundary dialogue benefit

the Ministry of Education? and the last subquestion, What do staff need to engage in cross-boundary dialogue? In the literature review I explored information on the first and second subquestions, What is dialogue? and What does it mean to cross boundaries in a hierarchy? In this section I state my conclusions from this research project. The section is organized under the same headings that I used for the Study Findings.

Value of Dialogue: Conclusions

The data on the value of dialogue answer my main research question. Cross-boundary dialogue can benefit the Ministry of Education by enabling staff to learn the perspectives of others and focusing on important long-term issues. In this section I draw two conclusions:

1. Cross-boundary dialogue enables employees to learn and understand the perspectives of individuals in other branches and divisions.
2. Cross-boundary dialogue enables discussion about education topics that do not have quick solutions but impact the work and decisions on all of the ministry's responsibilities.

Perspectives. Cross-boundary dialogue enables employees to learn and understand the perspectives of individuals in other branches and divisions. Isaacs (1999) supports the notion that gaining perspectives in dialogue “requires that we learn to include and take into account opinions different from our own” (p. 48). Throughout the dialogue sessions I observed, and the participants noted, that each person was interested in and respectful of all opinions and ideas. Tahoma noted in the interview that “the people there helped make me comfortable; they were open, willing to share, and listen to

my thoughts.” Arial indicated that the people in his group in the first session supported each other in the conversation and asked for clarification throughout the discussion.

The first cross-boundary conversation focused on the term *vulnerability*, the second session focused on how the concept of vulnerability affects the work of the participants, and the third session focused on government’s role with respect to vulnerability. The participants were surprised at the number of different meanings attributed to the term vulnerability. Raavi’s comment in her journal indicated her interest in the notion of children as human resource capital and the implied business approach to education. This was one of the different meanings of vulnerability that surfaced in the first conversation session. Other ideas that surfaced were that all children are fragile, the topic is a challenge for government, health affects vulnerability, there is a difference between teaching a subject and teaching a child, not all vulnerable students live below the poverty line, and there is an assumption that all Aboriginal students are vulnerable. In reviewing Raavi’s journal, I noted a comment that at the end of the first session all of the participants had shared an understanding that it is important for every child to have a dream.

At the end of the second session all of the participants agreed with Verdana that it is difficult for the “clumsy hands of government” and the “big-picture school act” to “meet the needs of every individual child” in our schools. At the end of the third session Georgia suggested that together the participants shared an understanding that the relationship between poverty and vulnerability is unknown and needs to be raised in a manner that makes it safe to discuss in a government environment. At the end of each

session after the participants had shared their ideas, they agreed on some of the challenges of attending to the needs of the vulnerable student.

These examples illustrate that over the three cross-boundary sessions the participants began to create ideas and perspectives together. Bohm and Nichol (1996), Gerard and Ellinor (2000), Isaacs (1999), and Kikoski and Kikoski (2004) all affirm that the outcome of dialogue is the creation of new ideas and perspectives. This corresponds to the literature on learning organizations, which showed that the benefit of gaining the perspective of others is that it results in common thinking (Wenger et al., 2002).

My research demonstrates the development of common thinking. Arial and Batang both explained that the Visual Explorer activity (Palus & Horth, 2001), which I outlined in chapter three, had resulted in the development of shared meaning. They recollected in follow-up interviews that this activity helped them to deepen their understanding of vulnerable students. As Batang engaged in the activity, she began to discover her own meaning of the term vulnerability, and her interpretation broadened as she talked with the other participants. She began to recognize the importance in any situation of appreciating social services supports, that looking at a picture does not reveal the supports that are in place or make enable assumptions about what support a child is or is not receiving. Georgia reported that these ideas resonated with her, and she felt that the participants began to see the need for a more holistic approach to the work of government. Arial indicated that, as his group grew from two to four, their ideas expanded, and with four pictures they were able to create shared meaning. At the end of the activity they were developing a group vision related to the education of all students that revealed the importance of each child in the school system having a dream.

Important vs. urgent. Cross-boundary dialogue enables discussion about education topics that do not have quick solutions, but impact the work and decisions on all of the ministry's responsibilities. The participants saw the concept of cross-boundary dialogue as valuable for long-term important issues in education because it allows the group to meet several times and examine a topic from many different perspectives. One of the participants remarked that the experience involved developing shared values and a sense of community around the topic of vulnerability. Georgia noted, "The sessions were helpful for me to build trust and shared values, especially with those who came to more than one meeting. I felt reassured that participants were committed to vulnerable kids and making a difference." Reviewing my notes from the conversation sessions revealed that the participants all felt that they have a role in attending to the needs of vulnerable students. I noted that at the end of the third session one of the participants asked, "Are there process or structures in place to help move our ideas from these sessions forward?" The other participants nodded in support of this question.

Kahane (2004), Isaacs (1999), and Schein (1993) call for communities to come together to address complex issues through multiple and ongoing discussions. My data do not reveal that the conversation sessions changed the actions of the organization with respect to vulnerability. However, if the ministry considers this project a pilot to explore the possible benefits of engaging in dialogue on important education topics, then the previous section on perspectives demonstrates that the participants did develop shared understanding of this complex issue. The ministry could use this project as an example to illustrate that a series of dialogues might enable the exploration and understanding of the complex, important issues related to education.

Participation in Dialogue: Conclusions

In this section I state my conclusions from the discussion of my last subquestion, What do staff need to participate in dialogue? The data indicate that employees need to feel interested in the topic, to be able to influence changes in the system, to receive the support of executive, and to see a diversity of participants selected through diverse methods. I have drawn upon literature from a variety of different topics to support the following four conclusions related to participation in dialogue:

1. The topic is the main motivator for staff participation in cross-boundary dialogue.
2. Staff will engage in dialogue if they know that they can influence the system with the support of the executive.
3. In planning dialogue sessions, it is important to consider the effects of executive participation.
4. To solicit participation, it is important to use a variety of different methods and ensure a diversity of participants who can express different perspectives.

Topic. The topic is the main motivator for staff participation in cross-boundary dialogue. The participants implied that they would participate in further cross-boundary conversations if they were interested in the topic from either a personal or a professional perspective. To understand this conclusion, it is helpful to refer to the work of MacKeracher (2004), who explores the motives for adult learning. One of the conditions required for learning is “material that is personally relevant to the learner and/or the learning experiences and processes that are perceived as relevant to the learner’s life experiences and current needs” (p. 128). This indicates to me that engaging in a

conversation session is an opportunity to learn. If the organization is to embrace the concept of cross-boundary conversations successfully, the participants should suggest topics for discussion that are relevant to their needs in the workplace. Gerard and Ellinor (2000) note “dialogue is successful when people talk about things that are really important to them” (p. 5).

Executive support and participation. Staff will engage in dialogue if they know that they can influence the system with the support of the executive. The data reveal that the participants wanted to feel that they could have a discussion and that the results would influence the system (Isaacs, 1999). It was critical to the participants that staff feel supported by the executive in this forum. As indicated in the study findings, Ariel stated, “To move to action, we need senior executive endorsement to act on ideas; then one can move forward.” Gerard and Ellinor (2000) concur that when leaders are committed and supportive of dialogue, it is more likely to be successful.

In planning dialogue sessions, consider the effects of executive participation. The data reveal the participants’ sense of unease about executive participation because of their lack of comfort in communicating vertically. They felt very comfortable communicating with their direct reports; however, several participants noted their hesitation to communicate with individuals at higher levels in the organization. Overall, they felt that executive participation in the conversations would limit the openness of the discussions, which is contrary to the opinions of Gerard and Ellinor (2000), who argue that, for dialogue to be successful, leaders needed to participate and not merely support it from afar. This advice indicates a need to explore executive participation in cross-

boundary conversations in more detail within the ministry. In Chapter Five I explore some of the future research that might be considered in respect to trust issues.

Participant selection. To solicit participation, use a variety of different methods and ensure a diversity of participants representing different perspectives. The focus group members offered differing ideas on how to select participants, but they clearly indicated the need for participants to come from diverse job functions. This suggests that the participants in dialogue sessions should be selected by using a variety of different methods that should range from volunteering to some form of organized, criteria-based selection process. I had difficulty in locating literature to support the conclusion that participant solicitation should occur through different methods; as a result, I have drawn upon my observations and experiences with group participation.

I have observed volunteer participation and invited participation in my work place. When I was organizing small conversations with the past deputy minister in the fall of 2006, I posted information about the conversations and invited staff members to volunteer to join in these conversations. I conducted nine sessions with seven participants, and approximately three individuals volunteered to join each session. To secure the remaining four participants for each session, I approached staff members whom I knew and personally invited them to participate. In this situation the personal invitation was well received and resulted in greater participation.

In the past year, at the ministry, I have observed a high participation rate for volunteer attendance in the deputy information conversations. In these sessions information is presented to the participants in a lecture and presentation style. It is my opinion, based on these observations, that people will volunteer to attend events at which

they can be listeners and observers, and they prefer a personal invitation to events in which they will be engaging in conversations with senior executive, such as the deputy minister.

Another consideration in selecting the participants might be their interest in the purpose and topic of the dialogue. An earlier conclusion is that the topic is the main motivator for staff participation in cross-boundary dialogue, which implies that individuals who work in an area related to the topic would be likely to volunteer to participate if invited to the sessions. When I pair my observations with the conclusion related to interest in a topic, I feel that dialogue sessions would benefit from a variety of methods of participation solicitation.

The focus group members thought that the mix of people from different job functions in the dialogue sessions was valuable. Gerard and Ellinor (2000) concur and report that a diverse participation base ensures that the perspectives voiced in the dialogue represent a broad picture of an issue because when clusters of like-minded people interact, it is difficult to generate “new ideas and innovations” (p. 2). Schein (2004), would agree with this “commitment to diversity” (p. 401), explains that leaders need to create opportunities for workgroups to interact with one another to gain an understanding of the different languages and cultures within an organization. Cross-boundary conversations among individuals from different divisions and work groups can be a vehicle for sharing language and culture.

In this section the data clearly identify the topic of the dialogue as a motivator for participation as well as the importance of different participant-selection methods. With respect to executive support and participation, the data are limited. The focus of this

project was to explore how dialogue could benefit the ministry and what staff need to participate in dialogue. The data demonstrate that staff will participate if the executive endorse the dialogue topics and do not attend the sessions. I feel that the conclusions related to executive support and participation need more research, and I discuss this in chapter five.

Structure for Success: Conclusions

In this section I continue to consider the conclusions to my last subquestion, What do staff need to participate in dialogue? These conclusions provide information about structures that will assist in the success of cross-boundary conversations. To support the following three conclusions, I draw upon the literature on dialogue and adult learning:

1. Cross-boundary dialogue requires dedicated time from participants.
2. Cross-boundary dialogue requires strategies that will effectively engage a group of diverse participants in a positive interaction.
3. Cross-boundary dialogue requires that one individual organize the sessions and facilitate a dialogue using methods and principles to support adult learning.

Time. Cross-boundary dialogue requires dedicated time from participants. The participants asserted that in our work environment, time has to be set aside for this type of conversation to occur. Kikoski and Kikoski (2004), Kahane (2004), Isaacs (1999), and Schein (1993), who would all concur with this statement, all gave examples of dialogue sessions that spanned a significant amount of time. In some of their examples dialogue occurred over a weekend, for a week, or in a series of regular meetings. Their examples demonstrate that participants need time to become familiar with each other, to build

momentum and excitement for the topic, and to develop shared meaning. This supports Raavi's statement that "time needs to be committed if we are to have deep dialogue."

Positive interaction. Cross-boundary dialogue requires strategies that will effectively engage a group of diverse participants in positive interaction. The cross-boundary conversation sessions provided an opportunity to enhance positive interactions among the participants and remind them of the value of sharing ideas. In these sessions the participants shared what they knew with respect to vulnerable students. For example, they shared their expertise on a community-based program that supports vulnerable students, explained how vulnerability levels are measured, outlined the impact of vulnerability on special education students, identified the challenges of setting legislation and policy to address aspects of vulnerability, and discussed vulnerability in relation to the independent school setting. Individual participants from different branches and divisions in the ministry have this information, and nine participants ultimately shared it. DePree (2004) and Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) suggest that successful organizations share information, coordinate ideas, and understand each other.

The participants valued the interactivity of the dialogue sessions and appreciated the strategies used to develop the conversations. In particular, they commented that the strategy that I used in the first session, which I described in chapter three, that allowed them to talk in groups of two, then four, and then eight was helpful. Verdana explained that the "two-four-eight worked well because people got to practice sharing their ideas," and Batang said, "Two-four-eight worked well as it broke the conversation into stages."

In these sessions I shaped the conditions for interaction by using the Visual Explorer (Palus & Horth, 2001) activity and my guiding questions for each session.

Isaacs (1999) identifies this as “creating the container” (p. 242). I created “conditions under which a rich field for interaction [could] appear” (p. 242). Georgia commented that the participants needed a safe forum to enter the discussion; Isaacs would concur with this statement because “the container concept provides people with a measure of psychological safety” (p. 244).

The concept of interaction is an important element of adult learning (MacKeracher, 2004). MacKeracher states, “Learning is interactive because we make meanings through exchanging information with our environment, most particularly with other persons” (p. 8). When a group of people engage in dialogue, they develop an understanding of shared meanings and new perspectives (Bohm & Nichol, 1996; Gerard & Ellinor, 2000; Isaacs, 1999; Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004). These ideas suggest that, to create a successful dialogue experience, a facilitator needs to create a safe and interactive environment to support adult learning. *Safe* might relate to some of my conclusions, including the consideration of executive participation.

Facilitation. Cross-boundary dialogue requires that one individual organize the sessions and facilitate a dialogue using methods and principles to support adult learning. The participants in the focus group agreed that the sessions benefited from facilitation. They felt that the facilitator could act as a problem solver and support them in reflecting on the content and experience of the sessions. MacKeracher (2004) suggests that facilitators are an important component of adult learning. When participants gain new perspectives and apply these perspectives to their work, these sessions result in learning.

To support this conclusion I reconnected with a couple of the participants to ask them how they have applied their learning from the sessions to their work. This was a

difficult question for them to answer. They were not able to identify a specific incidence of applied learning; rather, they focused on how the experience of the conversations affected their thinking. Batang suggested that the experience reminded her “to keep my mind open and not let unconscious assumptions hamper my thinking process as I conduct my work.” For example, she needs to pay attention to the nature of diversity with respect to students and recognize that the definition of student success in her branch might not be the same as the definition in the literacy branch or in the French programs branch.

MacKeracher (2004) recommends that these sessions be organized and facilitated for learning to occur, but she takes the concept of facilitation one step further and proposes that a facilitator use enabling and collaborating strategies. Enabling strategies “provide structured experiences to be shared by learners and used to generate knowledge or provide opportunities to share personal experiences from other contexts” (p. 209). As well, the facilitator should use a resource such as a picture to assist the participants in sharing their experiences. A collaborating strategy ensures “full membership in the group” (p. 209), and the participants are co-learners in the “discovery and creation of shared meanings” (p. 209).

MacKeracher’s (2004) description of dialectical learning speaks directly to the concept of facilitated dialogue. Facilitators can:

set up opportunities for interactions among learners or between a learner and a facilitator; promote the sharing of meanings and the development of shared models of interpreting reality; and encourage learners to assume control over their own learning and to see themselves as empowered to relate on an equal basis with others. (p. 223)

I was the facilitator the sessions, I provided a question for each session to focus the conversation, and I used strategies such as the Visual Explorer (Palus & Horth, 2001)

picture activity to create interaction between the learners. The Visual Explorer activity promoted the sharing and development of ideas and perspectives, and I encouraged the participants to reflect on the experience and the ideas that the group generated by thinking reflectively and recording their thoughts in their journals.

MacKeracher's (2004) also indicates that the participants' learning depends upon their "willingness to be open to new ideas, cope with ambiguity, accept potential feelings of disconfirmation and personal disorganization, and redefine the situation or problem in new ways" (pp. 223-224). Batang's comments earlier in this section indicate that the sessions reminded her to be open in her thinking and not let assumptions limit her ideas.

MacKeracher (2004) and my research data indicate the positive aspects of facilitation. Conversely, Isaacs (1999) cautions his readers against the use of a facilitator in dialogue sessions. He indicates that a facilitator needs to ensure that his or her approach is not "overly controlling [or] overly structured" (p. 331). He suggests that traditional approaches to facilitation could be "debilitating" (p. 332) and result in discussion rather than dialogue. The key to dialogue is to ensure that the participants feel that everyone is sharing the process and that it is a conversation among equals. In the conversation sessions I sensed that the participants accepted my facilitation strategies very much. Arial indicated in his journal that

being asked to function at a personal level we are rarely asked to choose a picture that means something to you, share what it means to you and what you think about it etc. (by the way, we should do that more often...it's a great way to get people engaged).

Batang suggested that as the facilitator I kept the conversation flowing evenly, I prompted as needed and I elicited responses from participants. Considering

MacKeracher's and Isaacs' points of view and my research, I feel that a facilitator can support the success of cross-boundary dialogue if he or she can set time for dialogue to occur, establish effective strategies for interaction, and respectfully become a contributing member of the dialogue group.

This portion of my analysis reveals insights into the elements that help to make cross-boundary dialogue successful. My research indicates that the participants need to dedicate time for the dialogue to be successful and that the facilitator needs to use effective adult learning strategies to ensure positive interaction among the participants.

Through my research I have identified the benefit of cross-boundary dialogue to the Ministry of Education in that it provides an opportunity for staff in different divisions and roles to come together to share and develop new perspectives on important education topics. Bohm and Nichol (1996), Isaacs (1999), and Kahane (2004) all concur that organizations with shared perspectives are able to adapt to new challenges that the environment of the 21st century presents.

My research also identified the necessary factors for successful implementation of cross-boundary dialogue. The topic of the dialogue, executive support for the topic and the concept, and the participant-selection methods all influence staff's desire to participate. In addition, structural considerations include the need to create dedicated time for the sessions, to use group process strategies to help the participants engage in the content, and to identify a facilitator to plan, support, and run the dialogue sessions.

Scope and Limitations of the Research

Considering the findings and the conclusions in this project, it is important to examine the limitations and the scope of the research. I conducted this action research

project in one ministry in the BC provincial government system and based the findings on the experiences of nine staff members over a period of two months. My research answered the main research question and the third subquestion; my literature review addressed the first and second subquestions.

I invited 11 individuals to participate in the project, but only could commit to the three sessions. The two individuals who were unable to participate because of schedule conflicts were from the executive level. In this regard, reflection on the conclusions related to executive participation is required if this concept is to be implemented in an organization.

The ministry employs approximately 300 staff who work in nine different departments. My participants engaged through invitation rather than a call for volunteers. I know all of the participants, and I know that they participated because they were interested in the topic and wanted to support me in conducting my master's project. I invited staff from four divisions who worked with education content and did not invite staff from divisions who worked in the areas of school funding, human resources, or government finances. I invited an executive member from the school liaison division, but, as I mentioned earlier, this individual was unable to participate because of schedule conflicts, and I did not have representation from the superintendents of achievement division.

This action research project represents the voices of nine individuals, and I caution the reader not to generalize these results and conclusions beyond the specifics of this study. I encourage the reader to consider these results and conclusions as a starting point to develop the concept of cross-boundary conversations in other public sector

organizations. However, the reader should continue the inquiry process to discover what elements will create effective dialogue in their environment. The next chapter of this study presents a set of recommendations and organizational implications to guide the implementation of cross-boundary dialogue in an organization.

CHAPTER FIVE – RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter I present four recommendations to support the conclusions of my research project, consider the positive implications for the organization if these recommendations are implemented, and suggest future research possibilities. I also connect each recommendation with one or two research conclusions and the supporting literature, and I suggest ways to implement each recommendation. Under organizational implications I suggest that an organization that embraces dialogue could foresee enhanced organizational learning through systemwide understanding and create permeable boundaries throughout the organization. This research has made me curious to know more about the concept of trust in public service organizations, and I expand on this in the last section of the chapter.

Study Recommendations

My research project explored how cross-boundary dialogue could benefit the Ministry of Education and what staff need to engage in dialogue. To facilitate the exploration of my research question I held three cross-boundary dialogue sessions with nine participants from the ministry on the topic of vulnerable students. I developed nine conclusions, outlined in chapter four, based on the experiences of the participants in these sessions. The conclusions led to the following four recommendations:

1. Create ongoing opportunities for cross-boundary dialogue.
2. Identify a division and a staff member to implement cross-boundary dialogue in the ministry.
3. Explore executive participation in cross-boundary dialogue in more detail.

4. Provide executive support for the concept and topics of cross-boundary dialogue.

Recommendation 1: Create Ongoing Opportunities for Cross-Boundary Dialogue

The participants in this research project identified cross-boundary dialogue sessions as a valuable use of their time for two reasons. First, they gained new perspectives on the topic of vulnerability. They came to recognize that the term has many different meanings and interpretations throughout the organization. For example, vulnerability can have a different meaning in the literacy branch, in the French programs branch, and in the Aboriginal education enhancements branch. Second, they had an opportunity to talk about a complex and important topic that touches most branches in the ministry. Vulnerability is a topic that is an ongoing issue in education rather than a problem to identify and solve in a short period. I concluded that cross-boundary dialogue enables employees to learn and understand the perspectives of individuals in other branches and divisions. As well, cross-boundary dialogue enables discussion on education topics that do not have quick solutions but impact the work and decisions on all of the ministry's responsibilities.

Isaacs (1999) and Kahane (2004) promote the value of dialogue in organizations, which indicates that dialogue enables departments in organizations to gain a comprehensive understanding of different viewpoints related to complex long-term issues. Kahane comments that solutions to complex problems emerge when people work together to understand an issue and generate ideas to improve the situation. Isaacs explains that the purpose of dialogue is for a group of people to reach new understandings about issues, concepts, and problems. Based on my research and the work

of Isaacs and Kahane, I foresee ministry staff gaining value from further dialogues about topics such as, but not limited to, homework, the achievement of boys compared to girls, and accountability processes. Therefore, I recommend that the ministry create ongoing opportunities for cross-boundary dialogue.

There could be many opportunities for cross-boundary dialogue to take place formally and informally at the Ministry of Education. A formal opportunity could be a regular series of conversations about different education topics or the top five ministry initiatives. An employee could structure a dialogue session around a presentation from an outside expert. The deputy minister could invite staff to participate in a series of dialogue sessions on a specific topic on which he needs to gain a thorough understanding.

Directors, managers, or staff could host sessions to generate common understandings about topics for which they hold responsibility. Staff could be encouraged to conduct informal dialogue sessions with their colleagues from within the ministry and from the field. Drop-in coffee break dialogues could be promoted by staff or by the executive for staff. Leaders could promote the value of informal conversations with colleagues through internal communication channels. Kouzes and Posner (2002) encourage leaders to create frequent opportunities for staff to connect across disciplines and engage in “positive face-to-face interactions” (p. 258). Cross-boundary dialogue could facilitate this type of face-to-face interaction, and it could be initiated by either staff or leaders. The next three recommendations can assist the ministry in implementing the concept of cross-boundary dialogue.

Recommendation 2: Identify a Division and a Staff Member to Implement Cross-Boundary Dialogue in the Ministry

In October and November 2007 I invited nine staff from four different divisions and in nine different roles to participate in the three cross-boundary dialogues. The participants thought that the cross-boundary dialogue sessions were successful because of the diversity of participants, the positive interactions among the participants, and my facilitation skills. As the facilitator of these sessions, I scheduled the sessions, solicited the participants, explained the process of dialogue, identified the topic, set the ground rules, and led an activity to bring all of the participants into the dialogue.

The participants commented that they participated because of the personal invitation and their interest in the topic. MacKeracher (2004) explains that adults will engage and learn if a topic is relevant to their work and interest. The topic of vulnerability connected to an interest in or a work responsibility of each of the nine participants. The ideas generated in the dialogues influenced their thinking and helped them to consider vulnerable students in new and different ways. Kahane (2004) and Schein (1993) would agree that dialogue fosters the development of shared perspectives from diverse ideas. Based on these data, I concluded that to solicit participation, an organizer should use a variety of different methods and ensure a diversity of participants who represent different perspectives. As well, the topic is the main motivator for staff participation.

MacKeracher (2004) promotes the use of strategies that support adults in becoming comfortable with their environment to create a positive learning experience. I used the principles of adult learning to engage the participants in a respectful and

engaging conversation about vulnerable students. I created three questions to guide the dialogue sessions and gave the participants pictures to begin the discussion on vulnerable students. The participants then engaged in conversations in groups of two and then groups of four before they interacted with the whole group. They reported that these strategies enabled them to become comfortable with one another and develop their ideas through the support of the group. Based on these data I concluded that cross-boundary dialogue requires strategies that will effectively engage a group of diverse participants in a positive interaction. As well, cross-boundary dialogue requires that one individual organize the sessions and facilitate a dialogue using methods and principles to support adult learning. Based on this experience and the comments of the participants, I recommend that the ministry identify a division and a staff member to implement cross-boundary dialogue.

My participants and I thought that a division and a staff person should be responsible for the implementation of cross-boundary dialogue. A division would help to embed the concept in the corporate strategies and the direction of the organization, and the division leader can then assign the responsibility to a director of a branch and to a staff person whom I will call the *dialogue leader*. In assigning the responsibility to a division, a branch, and a staff person, the ministry will create three levels of responsibility that can be embedded into the performance outcomes of an assistant deputy minister of a division, a director of a branch, and a staff person.

The main role of the dialogue leader would be to communicate a vision about cross-boundary dialogue to the organization and help staff and managers see the benefits and value of the concept (Kotter, 1996). Wheatley (2006) would encourage the dialogue

leader to generate energy with those who are interested and grow the idea outward as individuals become interested and embrace the value of the concept. The first responsibility of the dialogue leader would be to develop a framework for implementation. Bohm and Nichol (1996) and Isaacs (1999) suggest that the nature of dialogue is an organic and evolving conversation. To honour the nature of a dialogue, the framework would illustrate formal and informal actions for implementation and include ideas and input from all levels in the organization. It would begin with a plan to communicate and demonstrate the concept to interested staff and management. The dialogue leader would demonstrate the concept using a tool such as the Visual Explorer (Palus & Horth, 2001), or other methods that can respectfully engage a group of adults in a meaningful conversation. For demonstration purposes, the topic of vulnerable students could be used at a managers' meeting and at a Deputy Information Conversation. These actions would make staff and leaders aware of the concept and generate an interest in participating in future cross-boundary dialogues. As staff and leaders gain interest in and become familiar with the principles and value of dialogue, the dialogue leader would encourage individuals to use the concept formally and informally to ensure that dialogue does not become a rigid operation.

Recommendation 3: Explore Executive Participation in Cross-Boundary Dialogue in More Detail

The participants affirmed that the conversation in the cross-boundary dialogue sessions would not have been as open with the presence of executive members. A couple of participants were comfortable conversing with their direct reports, but they were hesitant to communicate with individuals at higher levels in the organization. It was

difficult to analyze these data because the invited executive members were not able to participate in these sessions because of other demands on their schedules. The only way that I could have verified the influence of the executive on the openness of the conversation would have been to have a member of the executive present at one of the three sessions. As I indicated in chapter four, the opinions of the participants were contrary to the opinions of Gerard and Ellinor (2000), who indicate that for dialogue to be successful, leaders need to participate and not just support it from afar. Isaacs (1999) also implies that leaders should be equal members in the process of inquiry. Based on these contrary views, I concluded that in planning dialogue sessions, the organizer should consider the effects of executive participation. In this regard I recommend that the ministry explore executive participation in cross-boundary dialogue in more detail. Under the section Future Research in this chapter, I present some ideas on how to explore the effects of executive participation.

Recommendation 4: Provide Executive Support for the Concept and Topics of Cross-Boundary Dialogue

My final recommendation relates to the support of executive for the concept and success of dialogue. In the previous recommendations I have suggested that staff, management, and executive members initiate various forms of cross-boundary dialogue. I feel strongly that cross-boundary dialogue should occur from informal and formal, staff- and management-initiated activities; however, based on my research and the supporting literature, I believe that one of the most important elements to make this concept successful is executive support of the concept and the topics of dialogues.

Throughout the interviews and the focus group the participants asserted that for them to take time out of their schedules for dialogue, they would need the support of the executive. They wanted to know that their ideas could influence the system. One of the participants stated that moving ideas forward from a dialogue session requires senior executive support. Isaacs (1999) and Gerard and Ellinor (2000) acknowledge that when leaders are committed to the concept of dialogue, the ideas generated through dialogue can influence changes in systems. Kahane (2004) implies that if leaders are supportive of the concept of dialogue, the participants will express their ideas openly without fear of offending or embarrassing anyone. Based on my research and the work of Isaacs, Gerard and Ellinor, and Kahane, I concluded that staff will engage in dialogue if they have the ability to influence the system with the support of executive. Furthermore, cross-boundary dialogue requires dedicated time from the participants. In this regard I recommend that the ministry provide executive support for the concept and topics of cross-boundary dialogue.

Executive support could take various forms. One of the participants suggested that a member of the executive could attend an introductory session of a dialogue series to thank the participants for their time and explain the value of the dialogue by reinforcing that the purpose of dialogue is to gain a greater understanding of each others' perspectives. The executive member could inform the participants of his or her interest in hearing about the new perspectives developed in the sessions. The participants could make a presentation on the new perspectives to the executive at the end of the series.

The executive could encourage ministry staff to bring ideas forward for dialogue sessions through the internal communication channels as well as direct conversations

with executive members. If an executive member feels that a topic that a staff member has suggested is not appropriate for dialogue, he or she should clearly explain why the topic cannot be supported. The executive member could help the staff person develop an idea that would be more suitable for discussion. Looking at the generation of topics from another angle, I suggest that executive members should initiate a dialogue on a topic that is related to upcoming decisions for which they are responsible. Topics such as trust in the organization, staff engagement, career planning, student achievement, connections with the field, or work-life balance might be subjects of interest to the executive.

The Ministry of Education has many internal communication channels, and staff are encouraged to interact and share ideas, as suggested in chapter one. However, the conscious engagement in regular dialogue is a new concept in the culture of the organization. Schein (2004) stresses the need for leaders to embrace, model, and support the use of the new activity for it to become part of the culture of an organization. In this regard I encourage our leaders to support the concept of dialogue as a regular and expected form of communication to generate new and creative ideas on long-term, complex education topics as well as other topics of interest to them and to staff.

This last recommendation leads into the implications of the research, which I have approached in a positive manner. At the recommendation of my supervisor, I have considered the positive outcomes of our ministry's embracing the concept of cross-boundary dialogue.

Organizational Implications

Engaging in regular dialogue across divisions in the ministry will present an opportunity to enhance organizational learning through a systemwide understanding and

create permeable boundaries between divisions. In this section I explain how the implementation of regular dialogue can assist in creating these opportunities and conclude by connecting my recommendations to the ideas presented in chapter one.

For an organization to learn, its members need to be able to understand the whole system. They need to understand how different divisions view an issue and consider how different perspectives contribute to the operation of the whole organization (Senge, 1990). My research and the literature review have demonstrated that, through dialogue, employees gain multiple perspectives of issues; as a result, I propose that dialogue become an organizational vehicle to enable systemwide understandings and break down barriers between divisions.

Consider the systems learning that occurred for the participants in my research on the topic of vulnerability. The participants came from nine different branches. People from various branches took away perspectives on vulnerability from the independent schools, literacy, Aboriginal education, early learning, curriculum, information, graduation requirements, and legislation branches. Because each person works to support the goals of their branch and, ultimately, the goals of the ministry, each person became knowledgeable about the issue of vulnerability from eight different perspectives.

Imagine if I were to hold three more dialogue series on vulnerability with three more groups. The amount of information and knowledge that the participants could share seems staggering. Wheatley (2006) asserts that organizations have to generate and share knowledge across all divisions of the organization and that this action will shift attention away from the individual parts of the organization and open the doors for viewing the organization as a whole system. Based on my research, the evidence indicates that

frequent engagement in dialogue will assist the ministry in considering education as a whole rather than a compilation of independent parts represented by individual branches and divisions.

In chapter two I drew upon the literature of Ashkenas et al. (2002) and Leavitt (2005) to illustrate that boundaries in organizations will always exist; however, every organization should create permeable boundaries so that information can flow freely throughout the workplace. I recommend that the ministry bring people from diverse backgrounds and job functions together to exchange ideas on specific topics related to education and the work environment. Perkins (2003) suggests that actions such as this create *contact architecture* that will support the development of networks throughout the organization. When networks are enhanced, boundaries between departments and branches begin to blur, and the organization starts to operate as a whole (Wheatley, 2006). Dialogue can assist the ministry in blurring the lines that define divisions and branches and can assist staff in developing networks focused on learning and sharing perspectives on different education topics.

To conclude this section I refer the reader back to chapter one, where I reported that the public service is focusing on improvements to the work environment. A large part of this focus relates to employee engagement, a multifaceted concept (BC Government, Ministry of Education, 2007b) of which communication is an element. In this research I explored a communication technique that assisted individuals from different branches in understanding each others' perspectives. Each year the Work Environment Survey uses elements of communication as an indicator of improvement in the work environment. The evidence from my research demonstrates that staff

communicate ideas through dialogue, which indicates to me that a potential spinoff from dialogue could be improvements in next year's work environment survey in relation to communication in the organization.

Future Research

In chapter four the data revealed that the participants in my research project would not have been as open if executive members had been present. I concluded that a facilitator of a cross-boundary dialogue session would need to consider the involvement of executive in the sessions. I recommend that the ministry consider exploring the meaning of these data. This section offers insight into this future research.

To explore the influence of executive participation, I would like to plan a dialogue session with an executive member present. I could observe the flow of the dialogue, investigate the experience of the participants in the session, and compare that to the data from this research. I could also initiate a new set of sessions with different participants to explore the experience of participants with and without an executive member present. To develop some comparable data, I would explore executive participation with the same set of participants in the sessions (Palys, 2003). This form of exploration may reveal some of the underlying organizational or cultural factors that affect the openness of dialogue.

I am curious to find out whether trust is an underlying factor that affects the openness of dialogue between staff and executive. Kouzes and Posner (2002) propose that "at the heart of collaboration is trust" (p. 244), and when a group is in a relationship of trust, the members are more open with their feelings and motivated to share in decision making. Kouzes and Posner sum up the value of trust in an organization: "With trusting

relationships, the capacity to rely on each other, and frequent face-to-face interactions, your organization can get extraordinary things done” (p. 266).

Kouzes and Posner (2002) identify sharing information as one of the foundations of a trusting relationship. In my opinion, and as I indicated in chapter one, the ministry has improved information sharing with staff. There are weekly Deputy Corners, Podcasts, messages sent to staff about new initiatives, and regular Deputy Information Conversations. It is interesting to note that three of these initiatives are not face-to-face interactions, which Kouzes and Posner link with the development of organizational trust. Dialogue is a face-to-face interaction that requires some form of relationship between the participants (Isaacs, 1999). It would be interesting to take the exploration of trust a step further to understand the correlation between trust and relationships.

I would like to explore Oshry’s (1995) idea that there is continual tension among the different levels of an organization that can materialize into a “we” and “them” (pp. 112-119) relationship. He asserts that this view of relationships in organizations limits the flow of communication; based on my research, I suspect that it also limits the openness of dialogue between staff and executive.

Oshry (1995) introduces the concept of the “dance of blind reflex” (p. 54), in which the leaders of an organization feel burdened with their responsibilities and cannot accommodate the requests of the employees, and the employees feel that they have no control over operations or decisions. This becomes the “dance of blind reflex” in that both groups react to each other instead of working together.

Oshry (1995) suggests that escaping the dance of blind reflex requires that all members of an organization become “partners in creation” (p. 67). Each side needs to

bring “its unique experiences, knowledge and skills—to become co-creators of the system” (pp. 67-68). Oshry encourages members of organizations to seek to understand each others’ perspective and ultimately increase their trust in each other. I see dialogue involving staff and executive as a way to escape the dance.

Considering the results of my data, the work of Kouzes and Posner (2002) on trust, and Oshry’s (1995) work on relationships in organizations, I would like to explore how the concept of trust relates to the concept of “we” and “them” (pp. 112-119) in the ministry. I am curious to know whether improved trust and relationships among different levels would increase the openness in dialogue.

This chapter concludes the presentation of the opportunity for the research at the Ministry of Education, the related literature, research methods, data analysis, results, and my recommendations. I am hopeful that the ministry will consider my recommendations for dialogue and pursue it as way to enhance communication throughout the organization. The final chapter of my project discusses my learning about research and leadership during my development of this paper and participation in the Master of Arts in Leadership program.

CHAPTER SIX – LESSONS LEARNED

In this chapter I present the lessons I learned about research and leadership that may help future researchers. I share four significant elements of my learning: recognizing that research is about drilling down to specifics, being patient as they learn to read academically, accepting that there will always be limitations to their research approaches, and making balance a top priority. Within each section I apply the lesson to my developing leadership skills. I finish the chapter with my closing remarks and make a brief statement about the value that I received from the Master of Arts in Leadership program and project.

Lessons Learned

Recognizing That Research Is About Drilling Down to Specifics

Through this research process I discovered that researching is about drilling down to specifics. My research question, literature review, and research approach started broad and became specific. As I engaged in each step of the process, I had grand ideas and big plans, but at the end of each step I had narrowed those ideas and plans into concrete, specific concepts.

At the beginning of the research process in *Leading Systematic Inquiry in Organizations (LEAD 563)*, I knew that I wanted to focus my project on communication in my organization, but I was unable to develop a firm research question. My question evolved with the development of my proposal and my literature review. It was not until I was well into my literature review that I finalized my research question.

Communication is an enormous topic, and I discovered through the literature review that exploring dialogue within the complex topic of communication in the public

sector was my passion. To create a specific research question, I had to explore the broad concept of communication to discover all of the layers within that topic. Glesne (2006) encourages the novice researcher to “use the literature to help find the focus for your topic; . . . cast a wide net. Do not confine yourself to your topic, nor your discipline” (p. 25).

My research approach became refined through my experiences in my courses for this program and through my supervisor’s coaching. I smile when I think back to the research plans I designed during the residency and consider how different they became upon implementation. Every classmate with whom I have spoken about our research plans has reported having scaled back most aspects of his or her research approach as well.

The most valuable lesson about obtaining specific information from participants emerged in the interview process. I discovered how difficult it is for participants to be specific in expressing their thoughts. During the interviews I believed that I was gathering valuable information for my data analysis, but as I wrote about the data, I discovered that I did not have specific examples to illustrate the thoughts of my participants. They all told me that the value of the dialogue sessions was in learning about the perspectives of others. This was excellent information, and it seemed to answer my research question; however, my supervisor encouraged me to delve deeper with this information and find out why new perspectives were helpful to the participants. I illustrate this lesson with an excerpt from my learning journal dated December 2, 2007:

It has been a steep learning curve to get to the point where I can solicit specific examples from the participants to support the ideas they are sharing. It is so easy for us as participants to talk generally about our experiences. It takes a lot of

practice and determination to ask a participant for specific examples to illustrate their points. I was unable to solicit specific examples from participants until about interview number six out of nine. It was at that point I had become more skilled at probing for information and examples. All of the information that I have received in my interviews has been valuable but the richest data came when I knew better how to probe. This week I am going back to the participants with three very focused questions that I hope will elicit some good information about why getting the perspectives of others at these sessions is so beneficial to them.

Based on my experiences, I encourage future researchers to settle into the process of thinking broadly and then patiently refining their plans down to manageable and focused actions.

As I apply this experience to my developing leadership skills, I have noticed that I am now looking at the big picture first and exploring possibilities. In the past I might have dismissed ideas because I felt that the scope was too big to manage. I now take on projects while recognizing that leaders deliver the big concept, and it is up to me to slowly explore and drill down to make the specifics of the project emerge while leading others through this process.

Being Patient While Learning to Read Academically

Developing the skill of reading academic literature was a slow process for me. At the beginning of this program I started to read entire books to find the right quotation, but I ended by having gained the ability to look at my bookshelf and identify an author who addresses the specific issue that I needed to reference in my writing. I can now confidently refer to specific authors to support my points of view. I believe that I gained this level of confidence through my attention to detail throughout the program and, in particular, the literature review process.

My skill at academic reading matured as I engaged in the literature review process. In LEAD 563, I worked hard to develop a detailed reference list of books and

articles, as well as detailed notes about my subject. These efforts paid off when I discovered that I did not have to go very far beyond my list and notes to create my literature review. I found that every time I went back to a reference book or article, I was able to be more and more specific about the information that I was seeking, and I was now scanning books for information and focusing on the topics listed in the indices.

Throughout my second residency my advisor group instructor continually asked my classmates and me who in the literature supported the ideas and claims that we were making in our class discussions and journals. This became very frustrating because at that point I could not name authors who supported my view points; however, through perseverance and an immense amount of reading and reflection, I attained the ability to refer to authors to support my ideas without having the books in front of me. I illustrate this learning in the following excerpt from my learning journal dated December 15, 2007:

We were told we would have '*Aha!*' moments throughout this program. Well today I had one of these moments. Today I realized as I pounded away at the keyboard on chapter four that I can now look at my bookshelf and pick out an author who will support a claim that I am making. What a sense of freedom and accomplishment! I know Oshry (1995) is about the tension between levels in systems; I know Wheatley (2006) is about the organic nature of systems; I know Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) are about the emotional dimensions of systems; and on it goes. Finally, I get what our instructor was on about in second residency!

I encourage researchers not to become overwhelmed at the amount of reading that comes with this program. With time and perseverance, they will learn to read quickly and eventually know who to reference as they develop their ideas from their research.

With this program I have become very skilled in scanning information and delivering a high-level message to my director and my assistant deputy minister (ADM). In the past I became mired in details and unconsciously provided my director and ADM

with minutia that was not necessary for their purposes. As I lead teams, I am now able to sift and sort the amount of detail that comes with any task or project and present the appropriate material based on the receiving audience.

Accepting That There Will Always be Limitations to Research Approaches

As a new researcher I found some of my choices of research approaches limiting. As a result, I learned some valuable lessons related to research methods that might be helpful to future researchers. The most valuable lessons relate to the use of journaling, recording methods that I used in the interviews, and, in my project, the realization that if I had recorded the information from the dialogue sessions, I could have added additional value for the participants and the ministry.

I used three methods of data collection in my project: journals, interviews, and a focus group, but the participant journals were my least successful method. MacKeracher (2004) encourages facilitators to ask adults to reflect on their experiences to promote learning and the development of personal insight; therefore, after each cross-boundary dialogue session I sent the participants a couple of reflective questions and asked them to submit their reflections to me, either in handwriting or by electronic mail. Throughout the research period I received responses from three of the nine participants. The data that I obtained from the journal entries was valuable because they added to or verified some of the interview and focus group data. However, as I talked with the participants in the interviews, they reported that it was difficult for them to commit time to reflection. I advise future researchers to build reflection time into a dialogue session if they want to obtain data from the process of journaling.

I chose not to record my interviews with my participants because I wanted the interviews to flow like casual conversations between my colleagues and me. This is contrary to the advice of Bernard (2000), who recommends the use of a tape recorder to enable the researcher to focus on listening rather than writing. My participants preferred that I not record the interviews, and they were very respectful of my note taking and stopped while I caught up with the writing. I found writing the information that I gathered from the interviews an easy task, and my participants often reported that I had effectively captured the essence of our conversations.

The limitation of not using a recording device was my inability to probe. I was focused on taking notes and found it was not until I had transcribed my notes that I realized that I should have asked for more detailed information at certain parts during the interview. I believe that if I had recorded the interviews, I would have been able to commit to listening fully, process the information that I was hearing, and ask clarifying questions throughout the interviews. Although this was a limitation, I do not feel that it compromised my data collection because my participants and I work in the same building, and I can ask them more questions about the points they had made in the interviews.

In my data-collection process I focused on understanding the experiences of the participants, and in this regard I took only a few notes on the ideas that emerged in the dialogue sessions. As I look back on the experience, I believe that I should have used a couple of strategies to collect information on the perspectives on vulnerable students that the participants shared in the sessions. I could have used this information to start another set of dialogues on the same topic and given it to other staff members who attend to the

topic of vulnerability in their work; or I could have given it back to the participants. Collecting the content of the dialogue sessions might have helped me to provide more concrete examples in the data analysis in chapter four. I advise future researchers to collect the content of the dialogue on flipcharts, with a recording device, on a laptop computer, or in longhand. I encourage all researchers to take the time that they need to refine their research methods to suit the needs of their research and the participants.

The experience of engaging colleagues in my research process has improved my ability to listen. I find that now I take more time to listen to their concerns and triumphs. I often do not have answers, but I am able to ask them questions that help them to work out a problem or an issue with which they are struggling in the workplace. I feel more skilful at interacting with colleagues throughout the organizational hierarchy, simply by listening more effectively and providing personal support.

Making Balance a Top Priority

I have learned that balance provides a stable platform upon which I can exercise my leadership abilities. Covey (1994), Goleman et al. (2002), and Kouzes and Posner (2002) all promote the balance between life and work as a fundamental element of successful leadership. A successful leader models balance and encourages employees and colleagues to work hard but also to take time for themselves and their families (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Throughout this research project I worked full time, changed jobs, attended to the needs and responsibilities of my family, took holidays, and maintained my health and fitness.

I have been able to complete this project by maintaining regular routines and discipline interspersed with elements of fun. I have dedicated a full day to homework

every weekend for the past two years, committed about three evenings a week to my project, and supplemented this with additional study time as required. At the same time I have carved out dedicated time for family and friends throughout the program. I have been very fortunate that my life and work in the past two years have been simple and uncomplicated.

I have learned to make homework fun; I often took my research to lunch. One of my favourite pastimes is going out to lunch, so I developed the habit of going out about once a month with a piece of my project. My lunchtime tasks ranged from editing my paper to reviewing my data to comparing my references in my writing to completing my reference list.

Because I have seen how routines and discipline combined with fun can result in a high level of productivity and satisfaction in life, I believe that I will use these lessons in the future. Covey, Merrill, and Merrill (1994) encourage leaders to ensure that their life buckets are filled first with the big rocks—the elements of life that are the most important, such as family, health, and major life and work goals. These elements create a foundation of balance upon which the responsibilities of leadership can take root.

Closing Remarks

Confidence is the greatest personal gift I have received from conducting my research project. During the second residency our instructors asked us to state one word that would represent personal success at the end of this project. My word was *confidence*.

As I reflect back on my research project and the Master of Arts in Leadership program, I realize that there are many ways for me to illustrate my increased confidence. I am willing to engage in an activity of which I do not know the outcome. I have the

skills to manage a project along a path and change direction as needed. I have demonstrated that I can lead a team of diverse participants through a process that results in broader perspectives and enables individuals to look at an important topic in education in a new light. I have proved to myself that I am capable of systems thinking, and I understand how an organization can reduce the communication barriers between boundaries within the government system. As a result of these demonstrated skills, I can confidently engage with senior level leaders to share and support my ideas with research and literature.

I now have the confidence to start a project without having every element approved and organized; lead a team through a concept that requires the development of relationships, trust, and personal commitment; and make recommendations to the executive on a strategy that could potentially improve the culture of communication. With the completion of this project, I will be using my developed confidence to move forward and seek opportunities to lead.

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APPENDIX A – EXCERPT FROM REPORT 8: BC GOVERNMENT

PUBLIC SERVICE ACT (PSA): EMPLOYEES BY EMPLOYEE GROUP,
GENDER, AND AGE GROUP BASED ON AUGUST 25 2007 PAYROLL DATA

Period	Male	% male	female	% female	Total	Average age
Aug 07	14,230	41%	20,757	59%	34,987	44
Aug 06	13,827	41%	19,632	59%	33,459	44
Aug 05	13,389	42%	18,720	58%	32,109	44
Aug 04	13,877	42%	19,531	58%	33,408	44
Aug 03	14,909	42%	20,333	58%	35,242	43
Aug 02	15,110	42%	21,070	58%	36,180	44
Aug 01	17,568	42%	23,918	58%	41,486	43
Aug 00	17,447	43%	23,156	57%	40,603	42
Aug 99	17,386	43%	22,586	57%	39,972	42
Aug 98	17,715	44%	22,377	56%	40,092	41
Aug 97	17,998	45%	21,972	55%	39,970	41
Aug 96	19,754	43%	26,204	57%	45,958	41
Aug 95	19,448	43%	25,689	57%	45,137	40
Aug 94	19,073	44%	24,471	56%	43,544	40
Aug 93	18,508	44%	23,524	56%	42,032	40
Aug 92	18,042	45%	22,185	55%	40,227	39
Aug 91	16,830	45%	20,538	55%	37,368	39
Aug 90	16,385	45%	20,174	55%	36,559	39

Calculations from Excerpt

Average of Aug 02 through Aug 07 = 34,000

Average of Aug 96 through Aug 01 = 41,000

Average of Aug 90 through Aug 95 = 40,000

(British Columbia Public Service Agency, 2007)

APPENDIX B – CROSS-BOUNDARY CONVERSATIONS: RESEARCH PROCESS

Research activity	Date	Participant's role	Researcher's role
Conversations			
<i>Conversation 1: What does the term 'vulnerable child' mean to each of us?*</i>	October 10 2:30 to 3:30 Room 536	Participate in the conversation—if schedule permits.	Facilitate conversation
<i>Conversation 2: Why is an understanding of 'vulnerability' important in respect to our roles?*</i>	October 22 11:00 to 12:00 Room 413A	Participate in the conversation—if schedule permits.	Facilitate conversation
<i>Conversation 3: What is government's role in respect to 'vulnerable children'?*</i>	November 7 10:00 to 11:00 Room 230	Participate in the conversation—if schedule permits.	Facilitate conversation
Reflective journal			
After each Conversation you will be asked reflective questions about your experience in this process and your learning from the experience.	To be completed by November 15	Respond to the reflective questions, if your schedule permits. You can handwrite your responses in your journal or you can respond electronically by e-mail.	Send reflective questions to participants at the end of each conversation. Compile electronic responses for data analysis Photocopy handwritten responses for data analysis (after the last conversation)
Interviews			
After each conversation, I would like to interview a few volunteers. As well, I hope to have a few informal conversations about your thoughts.	Dates scheduled with interviewee	Consider volunteering to participate in an interview with researcher. Engage in informal conversations with researcher.	Interview the participants. Interview participants who will not be available for the focus group. Engage in informal conversations with participants.
Focus group			
The purpose of the focus group is to develop a deeper understanding and verification of data gathered in the interview sessions and from the reflective journals.	November 21 1:00 to 3:00 Room 413A	Participate in the focus group—if schedule permits.	Facilitate the focus group Provide refreshments Arrange for note takers (colleagues who have not participated in the conversations)

(table continues)

Research activity	Date	Participant's role	Researcher's role
Feedback			
As the researcher I will be asking participants for feedback about my role in the process. This will include things such as my skills in leadership, facilitation, and explanations of processes etc.	Ongoing	Help provide the researcher with feedback	Seek feedback from participants
Recommendations and debriefing			
I will provide participants an opportunity to contribute to the recommendations of this research once the data has been collected and analysed. I will offer a debriefing session on the outcomes of this work.	January	Participate in the development of the recommendations and debriefing—if schedule permits.	Facilitate a session to develop recommendations for the research and debrief the outcomes of the project

* The questions proposed for the conversations may change as the sessions progress.

APPENDIX C – REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Reflective Questions Following Conversation 1:

1. Describe your experience in this conversation today. Some ideas to think about might include, Was it comfortable? Was it challenging? Was it informative?
2. What was the most interesting concept that you heard or learned today? Why was it interesting?

Reflective Questions Following Conversation 2:

1. What aspects of this experience today were the most beneficial to you?
2. What can you take back to your work from this conversation experience?

Reflective Questions Following Conversation 3:

1. What have *you* gained professionally and personally from this experience?

APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Main Interviews

1. Describe your experience in last week’s cross-boundary conversation.
2. If you felt this experience was beneficial:
 - What aspects were beneficial?
 - What influenced the success of this experience?
3. If you did not feel this was beneficial, tell me why.
4. What was the value/benefit for you in interacting with colleagues from different levels and divisions?
5. What motivates you to communicate across vertical, horizontal, and diagonal boundaries?
6. What hinders your communication across these boundaries in our organization?
7. Can you provide an example, from your experience, of a conversation that crossed boundaries in the workplace?
 - What were the characteristics of that conversation?
 - How did that experience compare to this series of conversations?

Follow-up Interviews

1. I have heard that this experience was valuable because you got to hear other people’s perspectives, both personal and professional:
 - What do you do with these new perspectives?
 - Can you give me an example of how you have used the information gained at these sessions?
2. How was this experience different from other “information” opportunities offered in our Ministry?
 - DM information sessions
 - All-staff meetings
 - Deputy Cam
 - DM Corner
 - Social opportunities
3. Vertical communication:
 - What motivates/hinders you in communicating across vertical boundaries?
 - How would this experience be different if senior executive were in attendance?

APPENDIX E – FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. If cross-boundary conversations were to continue, what do *you* need to keep coming?
2. What elements of the cross-boundary conversations made this a positive experience for *you*?
3. Now that we have had these conversations, what are *you* doing or can *you* do differently to connect across boundaries.
4. How can this strategy be implemented in our Ministry in a way that would benefit *you*?

APPENDIX F – INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Subject: Cross-Boundary Conversation Invitation

Dear XX:

I would like to formally invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for a Masters of Arts in Leadership at Royal Roads University (RRU). My name is XX, and my credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling XX, Director, at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

As we discussed, I am conducting a set of conversations as well as an introductory session, a focus group, and a session on final recommendations in my research. The dates for these activities are as follows:

Introductory Session - Tuesday **October 2, 1:30 to 2:30** in Room 230 at 620 Superior
 Conversation 1 - Wednesday, **October 10, 2:30 to 3:30** in Room 536 at 620 Superior
 Conversation 2 - Monday, **October 22, 11:00 to 12:00** in Room 413A at 620 Superior
 Conversation 3 - Wednesday, **November 7, 10:00 to 11:00** in Room 230 at 620 Superior
 Focus Group - Wednesday, **November 21, 1:00 to 3:00 (note 2 hours)** in Room 413A at 620 Superior
 Recommendation Session - January 2008, date to be determined.

I recognize that you may not be able to attend all of the sessions. *Could you advise me of which sessions you can attend?*

The purpose of my research is to develop an understanding of cross-boundary communication in a hierarchal public-sector organization. The attached Draft Executive Summary and Draft Consent Form outline the details of the project. The *final* versions of these documents will be provided to you in hard copy at the information session.

You have been selected as a potential participant because you are interested in participating in a discussion about students in the BC education system. Please note that the content of the conversations is not the focus of the research; rather, the participant experience related to internal communication is the focus of the research.

Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have questions regarding the project and its outcomes. Once the thesis is completed, the participants will receive a copy of the document and be invited to attend a debriefing session.

You are not compelled to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

Could you please confirm your continued interest in participating in my research project by response to this e-mail?

Sincerely,

My contact information is as follows:

Name:

Email:

Telephone:

APPENDIX G – RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

My name is Ann Garside, and this research project, “Communication in the Public Sector: Conversations Across Boundaries,” is part of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Leadership at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by telephoning Gerry Nixon, Director at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

This document constitutes an agreement to participate through invitation in my research project, the purpose of which is to develop an understanding of cross-boundary communication in a hierarchal public-sector organization.

I have invited 11 individuals from the Ministry of Education to participate in this research project, they have all agreed to participate in as many sessions as their schedule permits. I have selected participants whose work and/or interest is related to the topic being discussed in the conversation. As well, I have selected participants from different departments and hierarchal levels in the organization. The levels include technicians and researchers, education specialists, managers and directors, as well as the deputy minister.

I am an education officer, and I work in the Inter-Governmental Relations Branch. I have obtained names and e-mail addresses from the global government system and through my relationships with ministry staff.

My research project will consist of several parts and involve 11 research participants selected from ministry staff. The participants will be involved in three focused conversations on a topic related to the BC education system. The participants will be asked to consider and respond to a set of reflective questions following each conversation, either in handwriting or electronically. I will ask the participants if they would like to be interviewed, and the interview will take the form of an informal conversation and may even occur through brief conversations at unscheduled times during the workday with any of the participants. I hope to interview at least one participant after each conversation session. All participants will be invited to a focus group to further the data collection for the research. Finally, the participants will be invited to contribute to the final recommendations and be provided with a copy of the final document. It is foreseen that the maximum time required for each participant will be no more than eight hours in total, and all aspects of the research will take place during working hours.

The foreseen questions for the reflective exercise, interviews, and focus group may include:

- Describe how you felt about the experience of the conversation.
- How was the experience of the conversation session beneficial to your work responsibilities?
- How do you define effective communication?
- Where and how have you seen effective communication play out at work?
- What grabs your attention in work-related conversations?

- If you thought this experience was beneficial, what influenced the success of this experience?
- Are there individuals from other roles or levels in the organization who would benefit from this type of interaction?
- Is this type of experience sustainable? What structures need to be in place to enhance sustainability? Who needs to champion this concept to make it sustainable?
- What elements of this concept can be applied for use in the organization?
- What type of cross-boundary communication would benefit you in your role?
- How does this experience compare to other communication opportunities in the organization?
- What motivates you to communicate across vertical, horizontal, and diagonal boundaries?
- In your opinion, what hinders communication across boundaries in the public sector?

In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment of a Master of Arts in Leadership, I will also be sharing my research findings with the BC Ministry of Education. The research data will be used to write the required thesis for the RRU Master of Arts in Leadership degree, which will be submitted to the University and to the deputy minister of Education for internal use. The deputy minister is sponsoring this project, and the data may be used to inform executive council and ministry staff about internal communication in the organization. Finally, the data may be used to help other BC provincial government ministries improve their internal communications.

Overall, the information collected during this research will be recorded by hand by the researcher or submitted electronically by the participants. The data will be transcribed in Excel spreadsheets and MS Word documents. The researcher will photocopy handwritten journal responses for analysis. Information from the interviews will be recorded in a handwritten format, and a coding system will be used so the participant responses remain anonymous. The researcher and potentially the researcher's academic supervisor will view the raw data. The researcher's sponsor will not view the raw data; themes from the data will be reported to the sponsor. During the focus group session up to two or three staff members from the organization may be in attendance to act as recorders; in this case these individuals will hear and view the responses of the participants.

Where appropriate, the data will be summarized in an anonymous format, using pseudonyms, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless specific agreement has been obtained beforehand. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential in a locked cabinet on the premises and destroyed upon final approval of the project. Please note that in a focus group and conversation group complete anonymity is difficult to maintain; however, the records collected will be kept confidential.

A copy of the final report will be available online from Royal Roads University and through UMI/ProQuest and the Theses Canada portal and will be publicly accessible. Access and distribution will be unrestricted.

Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes. Once the thesis is completed, the participants will receive a copy of the document and be invited to attend a debriefing session.

You are not compelled to participate in this research project. This project has no bearing on your employment or future advancement. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice, but note that the information collected up to the point of withdrawal will be analyzed for the purposes of the final report. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

By signing this letter, you give free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Name: (Please Print): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____