

# Breakfast with colleagues: virtual action leadership education in northern Canada

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – We report on a virtual participatory action research project team conducted with educators and educational leaders in a northern Canadian school division. This leadership education project was co-constructed between the superintendent of the school district and our seminar research team at the University of New Brunswick.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A virtual learning platform embedded within a constructivist paradigm was selected to deliver the seminars since a distance of 4,000 kilometers separated the research/project team and the leadership education participants. The two-year project consisted of six leadership education seminars with each one taking place on a scheduled Saturday morning.

**Findings** – Initial data was collected through the world café activity and analyzed through a constant/comparative method. Findings revealed five thematic social realities that the leadership participants were confronting in their district. The themes are (1) Lack of human resources, (2) Increasing professional dialogue and development, (3) Structures impacting teaching and learning, (4) Community change and (5) Mental wellbeing.

**Practical implications** – Research-based virtually delivered leadership collaborative projects can be strategically planned and implemented widely across the world and bring university and public school educators, school leaders, and district superintendents together at low cost to both groups. Virtual leadership education projects impact education positively and foster leadership growth inside the school districts, which is critical for remote Canadian school districts.

**Originality/value** – This two-year project combined professional learning, leadership education, and research. The findings are valuable because, in year 2, the research team and the leadership participants worked together to create educational leadership strategies to address their challenges.

**Keywords** Leadership education, Virtual participatory action research, Distance professional learning, New Brunswick, Educational change

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and its long aftermath introduced an educational era of online teaching, leadership, and professional learning for the K-12 educational context. COVID-19 forced educators in public, separate, higher education, and private educational contexts to quickly increase their virtual synchronous and asynchronous pedagogies during the multiple school shutdowns and disruptions to face-to-face teaching and learning (Eddy, Macdonald, & Baer, 2021; Ma & Luo, 2022). The rapid shifts and recalibrations required in education presented a time when there were no easy or correct answers for many humans.

In schools, administrators made hard decisions based on the information at hand, which they hoped would be the least harmful pedagogical option for their teachers and students (Stewart, 2024). Heifetz (1994) wrote about adaptive leadership that mobilizes people, and his

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description captures the essence of leadership during the pandemic. Referencing the voice and leadership of Franklin Roosevelt, Heifetz wrote that the former United States president had stated during the tumultuous times of World War II that, “It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something” (p. 23). Years after the urgency of pandemic response has faded, the need to mobilize educators and leaders in the new educational reality of 2025 remains, although the direction is not necessarily straightforward. What exactly was learnt through the collective response to COVID-19 by educators and leaders from 2020 until today? Our team believes one effective way forward is through the use of virtual technologies for leadership education and professional development.

This notion of acting, particularly during difficult times, is at the heart of the participatory action research project discussed in this paper (Tuck, 2009) embedded within a virtual action learning setting. Our Research for Educational Administration and Leadership (REAL) team conducted virtual sessions with a group of educational leaders in a northern Canadian school division in 2023 and 2024. The sessions were focused on moving authentic ideas, both individual and collective, into research and action to engage and challenge complex educational issues the participants were confronting in their school community. If COVID-19 taught educators and school leaders anything, it’s that the unexpected can occur at any time, and the best-fit response is a response. Further, the most appropriate response is ascertained when committed educators and leaders work toward a common cause using a strength-based approach to respond to the challenge (Hamm, 2021). Kipling suggested it is important to “think– and not make thoughts your aim” (<https://poets.org/poem/if>). Kipling’s sentiment aligns with Lewin’s foundational ideas that “research that produces nothing but books will not suffice” (Lewin, 1946, p. 35). In action research, thoughts do not end in themselves but serve as catalysts for action. Researchers critically reflect on their thoughts and findings to inform subsequent actions, ensuring that practice is grounded in meaningful and thoughtful inquiry. It should be noted here that “researchers” are all of those who endeavour to engage in the plan, act, observe, and reflect of the cycle of action research, making it a natural fit for educators and administrative leaders in schools. This is our rationale for adopting a virtual participatory action research approach in this project.

#### *Post-COVID-19 professional learning*

In 2023 and 2024, district and school leaders in the northern district where this project is set were eager to reflect on their experiences with teaching and learning in a virtual space – a space that they had to invent “on the fly” during the pandemic crisis. What they found was that there were ample opportunities for professional growth for educators, even during their darkest months while they were teaching their students from home. Quite similarly, university educators, such as the members of our REAL team, had to get up to speed to access, learn, and implement virtual space tools for our students. Even for university professors in our institution who were genuinely accustomed and comfortable designing and delivering graduate content through learning management systems such as Desire2Learn, the advent of Microsoft Teams and Zoom allowed them to improve their pedagogies in the virtual spaces. Of course, there were growing pains for many educators in both the K-12 and university settings, but overall, they became better at using virtual technologies. Many may not have enjoyed the experience of online and virtual teaching due to their steady face-to-face classes pre-COVID-19, but they did get better in many ways.

Post-pandemic, our REAL team was more confident in our own virtual pedagogies and delivery models, leading us to how we could reach more educators across Canada with our professional leadership seminars. Our team had worked with educators in our province of New Brunswick, delivering professional learning seminars in face-to-face sessions for 12 months, but we had not yet waded in the virtual seminar delivery waters. The research reviewed for this project describes how timely and relevant professional learning for educators and school leaders has evolved in the last decade due to the opportunities associated with web-based

virtual technologies such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Google Meet (Irby *et al.*, 2023). School district leaders can now choose between flying or driving their professional learning specialists in to meet directly with their educators and leaders in face-to-face sessions or have them engage each other at a distance through contemporary digital technologies. The latter reality motivated our team to design and implement a six-part, two-year project with a northern Canadian school district that is located 4,000 kilometres from our campus in Atlantic Canada.

### *Relationship established*

A professional learning relationship was established between the northern school district and the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick. Many of the district's educators and school leaders had completed their M.Ed. degrees in administration and leadership, curriculum, and critical studies through our graduate program and, therefore, already had established relationships and friendships with several faculty members, including members of the REAL team. In the summer of 2021, the superintendent of the district and one of the team leads in the project met to discuss some professional learning opportunities related to leadership development in the district. Due to its remote location in northern Canada, the superintendent enquired about the possibilities of leadership development opportunities for the new and experienced teachers in the district who were firmly rooted in the community. The proposed professional learning would take place via Microsoft Teams, with the leadership seminar team delivering the workshop seminars to the district educators from a classroom within the faculty of education. It would be leadership development from within the school district, as Hargreaves and Fink (2006) outlined in their work on sustainable leadership. The authors argued in their book that if districts are challenged to entice school leaders from outside their district, they must establish leadership education and development protocols within the district to build the leadership capacities of educators they already have. More importantly, they must sustain their leadership education activities and conversations, so they do not lose their educators to leadership positions elsewhere.

Throughout 2021 and 2022, details of the possibility of professional learning emerged during meetings between the superintendent and the seminar team leaders. It was decided that an invitation (see Appendix A) would be extended to all the district educators and school leaders to participate in a seminar series that would be designed to help them develop their leadership skills and create goals toward enhancing their school and district culture. An invitational approach (Novak, Armstrong, & Browne, 2014) was adopted so that educators did not feel pressured to participate. The seminars were scheduled to be held in a meeting room at the district office on Saturday mornings to facilitate more participation. Saturday mornings were selected for two distinct reasons. Firstly, the participants would not be disrupted by everyday school matters during the week and inhibit deep professional learning (Knight, 2007). The school district employees were provided a full breakfast before the seminar started at 9:00 a.m., which was 11:00 a.m. for seminar leaders on the East Coast.

Secondly, the invitational strategy was selected to entice only those participants who wished to be part of the virtual seminars. So often, when district leaders mandate professional development, participants would rather be somewhere else and, in turn, disengage or opt out and remain back in their schools teaching and leading (Knight, 2007). We wanted those who chose to participate to be mentally present and fully engaged in the seminar discussions with their peers.

### **Literature review**

Action learning is rooted in the work of Reginald Revans, a physicist at the University of Cambridge (Bourner & Rospigliosi, 2019; Malone, 2013). Revans encouraged his colleagues to work and learn together in an environment where participants can “freely admit they are in a state of not knowing” (Malone, 2013, p. 54). Consequently, action learning embraces

constructive dialogue in a professional environment where questions are contributed without negative judgement. The professional working group moves forward together toward agreed-upon strategies and solutions to organizational challenges they face. Thus, action learning is a collective learning and reflective process with a deep history of addressing wicked problems (complex issues with no definitive solution (Rittel & Webber, 1973)) that humans confront in their work settings (Grint, 2008). Action learning also enables participants to break down the isolation and loneliness often associated with one-off professional learning sessions inside organizational frameworks and build better relationships with their colleagues (Stewart, 2024).

In the school setting, action learning could be considered synonymous or have strong connections with face-to-face professional learning (PL), professional development (PD), and professional learning communities (PLC). The latter concept was popularized and commonly used in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s in many school settings across North America. Authors such as Richard and Rebecca DuFour, Roland Barth, and Michael Fullan strongly advocated ongoing professional learning to counter the one-off PD sessions most educators were accustomed to due to the constricts of a busy school calendar. Authors who write about PLCs provide educators and school leaders with underlying concepts, strategies, and working group formats that can be framed to fit the school context and its multiple stakeholders (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). With the advent of better and more sophisticated online virtual tools, the opportunity for additional PD, PL, and PLC frameworks began to emerge in the decade since 2010. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of these tools to varying degrees by educators at all levels and sectors. As a necessary tool for teaching, learning, and delivering professional development, the rapid integration posed both the possibilities and challenges of virtual education, including disparities in access, need for training, and connectivity (Aspinwall, Pedler, & Radcliff, 2018). Action learning, emphasizing collaborative, reflective, and experiential practices, can be seen as a precursor to virtual interactive action learning—an evolution in adapting established pedagogical frameworks to emerging technological contexts.

#### *Virtual interactive action learning for leadership education*

Alharbi *et al.* (2024) describe virtual synchronous training environments as a popular delivery method for workplace training. Participants can learn anytime and anywhere if the technology is connected to efficient wired and/or wireless internet networks. The researchers report that educators and school leaders no longer must travel to engage in collaborative leadership education activities (Jenkins & Endersby, 2019). They can benefit from virtual learning seminars and workshops from home offices and basement corners (Azukas, 2022). Hickman *et al.* (2021) agree that “historically, in-person activities, workshops, coaching sessions, and annual professional development planning cycles have shaped leadership development and education. With the transition to virtual delivery that stemmed from the pandemic, we are playing with new rules on a new playing field” (pp. 34–35). Further, Jenkins (2018) reported no significant difference between face-to-face and virtual leadership education quality. In fact, if the virtual action learning session is planned effectively, there can be a higher level of engagement among the learners who bring their wisdom to the session from various locations. Virtual action learning “enables trainees to communicate with the trainer to exchange knowledge and participate in debates via synchronous/asynchronous communication tools, conversations, and e-mails” (Alharbi *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). Pautz Stephenson *et al.* (2021) coined the phrase “powerful learning in a virtual setting” (p. 17). This idea captures the essence of possibility while learning in the digital world; however, to reach such heights, the authors argue that it is important that senior district leaders intentionally create the learning culture and mechanisms for effective virtual learning that builds leadership capacity.

Aspinwall *et al.* (2018) report on leadership development through the virtual action learning process (VAL). Their research team found that their participants spoke highly enough about being

in a supportive group and learning environment during the project that it merited its own data cluster. “The creation of ‘safe space’ is one of the most widely acknowledged benefits of action learning sets, and for these participants, having spent six days together, the VAL sets provided safety and also a deeper sense of community and relationship” (Aspinwall *et al.*, 2018, p. 47).

In a study post-COVID-19, Bowman (2021) reported that a community of practice within a school district enhances leadership development among participating members. Interdistrict collaboration brings like-minded thought partners together to face similar school and district challenges. Creating a virtual network of learners contributes positively to school leader participation, engagement, and professional learning. “Over time, network members became more aware of one another’s competence. They engaged in challenging conversations and participated in facilitated interactions such as critical friends protocols, offering and receiving feedback on work such as goals and milestones” (p. 46). Dixit (2022) found that virtual professional learning is more effective for the transfer of knowledge through network collaboration when supervisors and senior leaders are also participants in professional learning. Domingo-Coscollola, Arrazola-Carballo, and Sancho-Gil (2016) described their collaborative action project (CAR) and found that sustainable educational change can be achieved only through engaging and involving teachers and leaders in the decision-making process. The use of virtual platforms enhances participation and grows the network, which in turn contributes to more meaningful dialogues related to priorities that need to be addressed in the district.

#### *Structuring virtual action learning*

Irby *et al.* (2022) noted that very little is currently known about the essential components of creating and implementing an effective virtual professional development (VPD) session. The authors report that boundless opportunities utilizing contemporary software such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom help school leaders build their capabilities and extend their professional networks. Irby *et al.* (2023) and Marsh and Johnson (2005) also argue that mentoring and coaching networks form organically through virtual professional learning communities. The technology also cuts school districts’ costs for delivering PD across regions within their jurisdictions. According to Irby *et al.* (2022), there are seven key principles that virtual facilitators should follow for delivering successful VPD. In their article, they write that:

- (1) The VPD should be well organized.
- (2) The content should be engaging, intriguing, and informative, enhancing competencies related to the VPD topic or issue. The topics should also invite differing points of view and be suitable to the level of participant experience.
- (3) The VPD organizers should promote and maintain a supportive learning environment.
- (4) There should be a dedicated time commitment on the part of the participants.
- (5) The pace of delivery in VPD is important to consider.
- (6) Virtual training materials should be provided to participants.
- (7) Reflection should be included in the VPD (Irby *et al.*, 2022, p. 14).

The organization and structuring of the virtual action learning and professional development will provide participants with an authentic opportunity to grow their leadership capacities alongside like-minded leaders. It will also allow all participants to break down the loneliness of leadership while meeting new colleagues from great distances experiencing the same challenges as they are (Radcliff, 2017).

#### **Methodology: virtual participatory action research embedded within constructivism**

Following a similar participatory action research (PAR) methodological framework that our team employed in a recent face-to-face project with vice principals in New Brunswick

(Hartnett *et al.*, 2024), our work aligns with the constructivist worldview (Greenfield, 1986, 1993). The significant difference between this project and the NB project was that our team engaged the northern Canadian participants virtually through Microsoft Teams instead of being in a classroom together. Knowledge construction takes various forms within the constructivist/interpretive paradigm. It is a meaning-making process that educational researchers rigorously adhere to within their chosen analytical structure to get as close to the social realities within the environments they are studying (van der Walt, 2020). It is always important to understand that educators exist in a world rich with multiple realities. One event that takes place in a classroom, school, or community can generate many perceptions from the social actors, which can result in blurry and varied social realities.

Our virtual action research project was participatory in nature and thus falls into the participatory action research (PAR) field (Fine & Torre, 2006; Tuck, 2009). “PAR is an approach where the researcher-facilitators work ‘with’ participants instead of simply studying them and their situations for researcher gains” (Hartnett *et al.*, 2024, p. 9). We received approval from the district superintendent to collect data during the first seminar, which we would analyze and share with the participants at the second seminar. Our team submitted a research ethics application to ensure our methods aligned with the ethical practices required for research involving humans. We received approval from our institution prior to starting the project.

Aligned with principles one and three, to be prepared and maintain the learning environment, our team worked with our Information Technology personnel to ensure that all equipment would function on a Saturday morning. The school superintendent welcomed all the participants with breakfast at each seminar and acted as our on-the-ground facilitator and co-participant within the classroom setting in her district. To gather rich data on the current social realities of the participants, we implemented a World Café participant engagement activity to get the group working together to share and describe the challenges they were confronting in their schools and some of the strategies they used to work through them. To be precise, our team asked the participants two questions: (1) *What are the challenges that school leaders are confronting in 2023 in your schools and communities?* (2) *What are strategies you are using to address your challenges and complexities?*

Our team explained the World Café “Rules of Engagement” that would bring the leaders together at the tables to work collaboratively in conversation and deepen critical thinking. Each Café rotation was seven minutes long. One person in each group was assigned to record the key points of the conversation at the table. There were three tables of participants to begin the leadership conversation. We encouraged the recorder to capture everything they could in the way of text, symbols, utterances, and creative storying (Taylor, 2020). After seven minutes, we asked the recorder to stay at their table and everyone else in that initial group to move to another table to work with new colleagues. The second rotation was critical in the activity as the recorder went through the first rotation data, and each member could then add to or counter commentary to stretch the ideas into deeper meanings in response to the questions. In the third rotation, participants were encouraged to read and reflect on the data in front of them, identify key ideas and patterns in the responses, and highlight them. After this third rotation, we asked each group to share in the discovery of what they had constructed through the World Café activity and what they had learnt about themselves, their schools, and their colleagues. Table 1 below provides an example of the information (data) gathered during the World Café activity and processed by our research team using the constant comparative method (Fram, 2013).

The World Café is an active learning and engagement activity; the project leaders framed and implemented the parameters for safely constructing learning and sharing in their context. Once activated in the World Café process, “Everyone is engaged in the design and management of the inquiry; everyone gets into the experience and action that is being explored; everyone is involved in making sense and drawing conclusions; thus, everyone involved can take initiative and exert influence on the process” (Heron & Reason, 2008, p. 366). This research format was effective because once the data was collected, it was

**Table 1.** World Café data*The constant comparative analytical process*

Human Resources	Professional demands/desires	Community changes and Pressures	Mental well-being	Structures
Human Resources	Professional conversations and dialogue	Challenges with poverty and demographic change- in and out	Challenges with mental health-staff students and community	Physical and organizational structures
Human Resources	Professional development and sense of community	Community services	Health and wellness	Facility and structure

*These are the categorical themes based on our interpretation of the challenges you described*

Human Resources	PD and dialogue	Community change	Mental well-being	Structures
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*These are the thematic social realities or the themes based on our interpretation of the data*

There is an absence of human resources in FFSD related to qualified staff and supply teacher shortage	Leaders perceive a need for professional development and deeper dialogues on curriculum development and implementation (i.e. Indigenous curriculum, French immersion, and assessment practices)	Community change is contributing to higher levels of poverty in the community and giving educators additional responsibilities	Families and children who are connected to the schools are experiencing mental health challenges. This reality is negatively affecting the work-life balance of teachers and leadership efficacy	Physical and organizational structures are impacting leadership, teaching, and learning opportunities
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**Source(s):** Table created by authors

analyzed by the project leaders. Our team met the week following the PL session to code and categorize the data through a constant comparative approach (Fram, 2013). Gradually, several themes were generated as they were identified by the patterns and frequencies in the data (Saldaña, 2021). Once the social realities were developed based on identified themes, they were presented to the participants in the second seminar for further discussion, elaboration, and clarification.

## Findings

The primary purpose behind the project was to get the participants thinking and working together as common leaders to address some issues and challenges in their district. The World Café activity as a data collection tool allowed our team to better understand some of the participants' challenges. Five challenging social realities were presented to the district team for consideration in the second seminar, which had now grown by two educators ( $N = 12$ ) who could not make the first seminar. Like many school districts in provinces across the country, especially in rural regions, the participants clearly identified a concern with human resources. The theme of being short-staffed in the classrooms was prominent throughout the World Café data. A second reality to this theme was that they had to hire classroom teachers who were not qualified teachers. Some of the hires had degrees but had not completed an education degree and did not have the pedagogical background to work with students. Further, there was also a shortage of substitute or replacement teachers, often leading to additional disruption in their schools where classes had to be combined, or teachers would lose preparation periods.

The leadership participants also revealed that their community was undergoing a demographic change that saw many newcomers in their school. At the same time, the primary

industry that had supported the community for decades closed and many of its workers were transferred to work in another community two hours away. The community population had declined significantly, and the rapidity of the changes contributed to higher levels of poverty in the community and placed increasing pressure on district educators and personnel to provide additional support with diversifying responsibilities and fewer qualified and experienced personnel.

Participants also reported challenges with physical and organizational structures in the district. Based on the history of the school division, the schools were built in areas to serve the previously growing community population, which stalled in the early 1970s. Now, the declining population has reduced student enrolment, and the division found itself duplicating services in its schools within the shrinking town. The conversation in the second and third seminars turned to the possibility of realignment of schools. However, that suggestion was a flashpoint among school staff and community members a few years before, and realignment did not occur then. This point will be taken up in the discussion of this article.

The fourth social reality constructed from the café data concerns the need for professional development and dialogue within and outside the educational context. The participants were concerned about the limited discussion on curriculum development, especially in the First Nations curriculum, to meet the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report (TRC, 2015). Participants also perceived a need for professional development and more profound dialogues on assessment practices, protocols, and French immersion education within the school division.

The fifth social reality related to the theme of mental wellness and intersected with all the other themes. Figure 1 below illustrates how each theme flows into the fifth theme. Participants described how the challenges in the school division impacted the well-being of educators, students, and leaders in the district.

It is important to note that our work with the school division happened in 2023 and 2024, but there were still lingering effects from the COVID-19 pandemic, which had impacted all the personnel in the division to some degree. The families and children connected to the schools in the division still felt the impact of the pandemic, with concerns about future school closures and how that would impact the community. One of the consequences was a high student absentee rate.

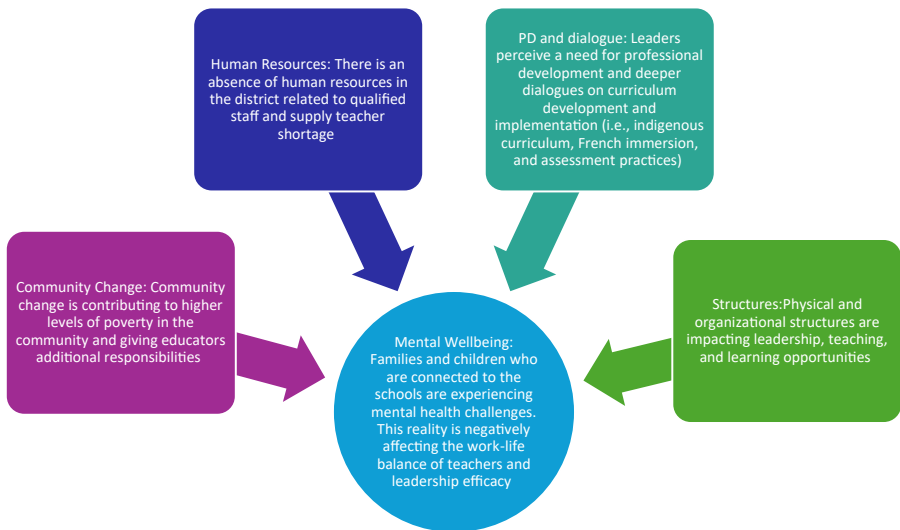


Figure 1. Thematic social realities constructed from World Café data. Figure created by authors

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The project's next step was critical for leadership development through virtual action research and seminars. We once again drew from Kipling's wisdom and encouraged the leaders to "think—and not make thoughts your aim" (<https://poets.org/poem/if>), but the foundation on which to launch effective action.

## Discussion

### *Virtual action learning*

This project offered the research team and participants opportunities for growth and development. One aim of the project set out by the superintendent was leadership education. Drawing from the work of Shields (2018), Searby (2014), and many others who have invested their academic careers in making educators and leaders better, our REAL team wanted to engage the (self)identified and emerging leaders in the district by extending an invitation to join us in constructing ways forward.

Virtual action learning presented challenges despite the best-planned efforts. Having our dynamic team present via technology adds layers of difficulty and increased anxiety; there were times when speakers or cameras were not working as anticipated. Fortunately, engagement was high as discussions were meaningful and centred around the school district's needs. During follow-up conversations with the superintendent, our team was told that discussions continued long after we signed off Teams. Notably, the educator and leadership participants chose to stay and discuss their current social realities longer and critically think through them together. Therefore, "PAR was a process to empower communities in educational management used in all stages of the research" (Ruechakul, Erawan, & Siwarom, 2015, p. 75). Hard conversations ensured that school leaders had, first and foremost, a voice to express their concerns and, secondly, a supportive learning community with similar dreams of improvement.

The research team took time to clarify the social realities, reflecting more deeply to ensure the reality of the participants was wholly understood. As Rowland, Myers, Elford, and Smith (2023) explain, "Because virtual [researchers] are not in physical buildings and cannot spontaneously observe the climate or culture in a building or classroom, they need to build and foster strong relationships by asking educators questions about their setting, context, teaching philosophies, feelings, and needs" (p. 78). Taking these steps took time and has the benefit of deepening the reflection by having to summarize and articulate their thoughts. The drawback is that we are not necessarily privy to the tone and offshoot conversations that may have been happening.

Throughout the seminars, we worked together to identify the top two social realities of importance and how to create actionable solutions to address these challenges. A benefit to this project was that "learning experiences are ongoing, school leaders can benefit from stronger levels of support over a more extended period than that provided by a short face-to-face professional development" (Pashmforoosh, Irby, Lara-Alecio, & Tong, 2023, p. 2). These sessions were more than a one-off professional learning session; this project was an ongoing opportunity for rich discussions and leadership building to begin a dialogue of possible change and keep it going. Participants benefitted from over 10 hours of direct contact and the many hours the researcher team dedicated to planning, conferencing and reflecting.

### *Participants working with the findings*

When asked to prioritize the needs based on the social realities presented, the school leaders addressed the mental health of staff and students and prioritized human resources related to qualified staff and substitute/teacher shortages. They acknowledged challenges within their learning community, which included a declining student population and much movement of students between their two elementary schools.

The research team invited participants to clarify each issue presented, including the mental health of staff and students, prioritize human resources related to qualified staff and substitute/teacher shortages, and offer suggestions regarding the school district's mental health needs and human resource concerns.

From these identified needs, the school leaders realized they wanted to reconceptualize the schools in their district. One participant wrote, “I think the restructure (K-3, 4–8) needs to happen so we can stop duplicating resources and give students ample opportunity.” Restructuring schools was a solution in that resources would not be duplicated, and services could be more readily available to students. The participants working on this project were small representatives of the district, and it was noted that in order to implement large-scale change, community buy-in would be necessary. It became apparent to the participants that if the schools were restructured, “resources could be eliminated, and those funds allocated elsewhere.” This social reality of lacking supply teachers was a factor impacting the other identified concern, namely staff mental health. One participant wrote, “Teacher burnout and the increase of sick days and more needs for substitute teachers. . .” in a district where vacancies are not filled. Restructuring the schools in the district was a solid solution for a resource management solution, solving several systematic problems.

Based on these findings, the third and final seminar in year 2 was designed to reflect change management and the need for unity among the school leaders in the district as they moved forward. As Fullan (2001) outlined in his book on educational and organizational change, “Leading in a culture of change does not mean placing individuals into unchanged environments. Rather, change leaders work on changing the context, helping create new settings conducive to learning and sharing that learning” (p. 79).

The research team collaborated closely with district school leaders to understand the social realities in a Northern school district. Throughout their leadership discussions, school leaders acknowledged their challenges but maintained an uplifting optimism about their students and the future of education in their area. The leadership education that was provided for the project leadership participants through the virtual format provides a solid roadmap for other researchers and professional learning specialists who wish to deliver similar seminars in leadership development. The sky is really the limit for this type of leadership education and professional development and high yields in discovering and responding to school and district social realities can be obtained through careful planning and seminar delivery. Overall, the project was highly successful based on follow-up feedback from the superintendent and the participants who continue to address their challenges in their school district. And this is where the seminar leaders and school district leaders parted ways . . . for now.

#### *Recommendations for conducting virtual participatory leadership research seminars*

The action research project provided opportunities for key stakeholders to democratically prioritize systemic issues and deepen collective understanding. By engaging in this model, the district leader and the researchers capitalized on the universal benefit of collaborative inquiry, which “realizes teachers as partners in the mission to improve the learning and experiences of students.” (Donohoo & Velasco, 2016, p. 76) and, as Hatti (2015) notes, “[scales] up the success already around us” ([www.pearson.com/content/dam/corporate/global/pearson-dot-com/files/hattie/150526\\_ExpertiseWEB\\_V1.pdf](http://www.pearson.com/content/dam/corporate/global/pearson-dot-com/files/hattie/150526_ExpertiseWEB_V1.pdf)).

The methodology resulted in an amiable and compelling learning community, reinforcing the researchers’ hypothesis that action research within the hybrid virtual terrain is a viable and enjoyable way to enhance teacher agency and advance student learning. In turn, the REAL team would suggest creating research opportunities where leaders and teachers gather to broaden collective knowledge and seek organically solutions to systemic challenges. Throughout the project, the research team sought participant feedback and reflected on the success of the process and the activities employed. The following observations are assembled as recommendations and offer guidance for anyone considering a similar endeavour.

#### *Recommendation 1: planning*

Scrutinizing necessary logistics, both technical and otherwise, was an imperative piece for the success of the hybrid virtual participatory research. Trialling the technology on both ends of

the communication to avoid challenges with sound and preparing alternative equipment for any unforeseen technical issues helped avert frustration and preserved participant engagement. Pre-planning the flow of activities and embedding time for uninterrupted dialogue among the participants supported the intent to ascertain authentic system realities and reinforced participant agency. The virtual environment limited the ability of the researchers to engage in the conversations actively. Intervals to synthesize and examine information from the whole group allowed confirmation of collective understanding and provided an opportunity for any necessary clarification.

#### *Recommendation 2: build relationships*

Relationship building was central to securing open dialogue and the project's success. The positive outcome of the project would not have been possible without a focus on building relationships within and across contexts. Preliminary conversations between the primary team lead, and the district superintendent cultivated curiosity and elevated a desire to engage in the project. In addition to unearthing the aspirations of both district leaders and researchers, these conversations also ensured that the district leader understood and subscribed to the leadership development project through the participatory research process. Connecting with the district leader throughout the seminar series provided an opportunity for reflection, input and troubleshooting, which enhanced the experience of the participants and the research team.

In their recent work, [Dewitt and Nelson \(2024\)](#) suggest that to transform a system, people need to be *interconnected* when collaborating, which is a deep relationship that “occurs when there is reciprocity through the different levels of a school system” (p. 41). By agreeing to host the event and inviting leaders and teachers to engage in the project, the district leader conveyed respect for the wisdom of those working in the regional schools and illustrated the desire for open, collaborative dialogue. Also, by ensuring participants received a thorough description of the project objectives, the primary team leader set the stage for an environment of human interconnectedness where “members . . . focus on open communication and honour the ability to respectfully challenge each other's thinking and beliefs. . .” ([Dewitt & Nelson, 2024](#), p. 32).

#### *Recommendation 3: disrupt historical professional learning understandings*

Commonly employed professional learning approaches provide a give-and-take experience where the presenter acts as a “teacher,” and information flows from them to the participants or “learners.” This long-practiced model of learning is well embedded in education, and unless there is intent to disrupt customary methods, “even the most well-informed audience members give themselves over to a child-adult relationship in which the presenter's job is to entertain and inform, while [they] accept or reject what is being delivered” ([Garmston & Wellman, 1992](#), p. 43). To realize the objective of this research method, it was imperative to interrupt any resistance to participate and foster the willingness to step into the role of the contributor.

#### *Recommendation 4: respect the commitment.*

As lifelong learners, teachers often seek and finance opportunities for professional growth, which they frequently engage in their personal time ([Hamm, 2021](#); [Searby, 2014](#)). Although there was no cost to participate in the project, it was important to recognize and extend gratitude for their readiness to show up on the weekend over the course of the two-year seminar series. The research team intentionally expressed thanks for their commitment to the project and admiration of their desire to improve the learning environment. In addition, the district leader and the researchers expressed understanding for anyone with personal obligations that interfered with full attendance.

#### *Recommendation 5: acknowledging success*

The mental health of teachers, the mental health of students, and the perils heightened by the lack of teachers are immense issues that may be deemed as impenetrable perennial problems.

Participants could observe their concerted effort by reviewing and recording the numerous actions or strategies employed to confront these challenges. In addition, there was the acknowledgement that, although the issue persisted, their actions positively impacted the learning environment. Exposing proactive responses ignited hopeful and reflective conversations. Discussions highlighted the pride participants had for their leadership roles, served to remind them of the positive contributions they were making to their learning community and ignited their confidence in the future of public education.

### Conclusion

The iterative nature of participatory action research lends itself to co-constructing social realities, reflecting on the meaning of these realities, dreaming new possibilities together, and designing a plan forward. Through this project, we explored the use of technology to bridge the gap in access to resources and professional learning commonly experienced by remote communities. By offering the services of an external leadership development team experienced in participatory action research and active professional learning through virtual connections, we were able to establish a platform for deep exploration and open communication among the participants. This hybrid model was particularly successful as the participants had long histories in the community and varied experiences and opinions about the causes, the needs, and the potential solutions to these challenges. In guiding the active research process and engaging in feedback loops with the participants, they could hear and synthesize their commonalities, priorities, and next steps for consideration. It seems that the careful planning and clear articulation of the objectives for both parties (the district and the research team) before and across the engagement in the hybrid model naturally led to the emancipation of the research and active professional learning. We view this as a strength of this model since a new team of district leaders has been formed and has gained some experience in engaging in the cycles of participatory action research to design solutions to the challenges they face as they arise.

A community-driven solution-finding team has been activated by keeping the qualities of effective virtual and active professional learning in mind, designing alongside the people living in the communities, asking questions, and intentionally feeding back their realities through a filtered lens of themes. This newly formed team may be what the community needs to determine and sustain change toward improved resourcing and mental health in their education system.

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### Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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