

Relational Trust: The Glue that Binds a Professional Learning Community

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This article examines how principals describe the nature of relationships and presence (or absence) of relational trust among teachers, and between the teachers and the principal in the discourse of professional learning communities. Participants were 12 school principals from urban, suburban, and rural communities in Manitoba. In the discourse of learning communities, the notion of trust is articulated as being relational in its orientation and developed around group norms of safety, risk-taking, and change orientation. The existence of relational trust appears to have the effect of fostering collaboration and promoting willingness among staff to grow professionally. The study also suggests the important role that principals play in establishing relational trust as a precondition for the growth of a professional learning community. Because relational trust appears to be critical to the functioning of a professional learning community, it may be unlikely that substantive school improvement can be achieved without close attention to it.

Cet article porte sur la description que font les directeurs d'école de la nature des rapports des enseignants entre eux, des rapports entre les enseignants et le directeur, et de la présence ou l'absence de confiance relationnelle dans le contexte de communautés professionnelles d'apprentissage. Douze directeurs d'école de communautés urbaines, rurales et de banlieue du Manitoba ont participé à l'étude. Dans le discours des communautés d'apprentissage, on décrit la notion de confiance comme ayant une orientation relationnelle et en termes de développement des normes collectives touchant la sécurité, la prise de risque et l'orientation vers le changement. L'existence de la confiance relationnelle semble favoriser la collaboration et promouvoir la volonté chez le personnel de s'épanouir sur le plan professionnel. L'étude évoque également le rôle important que jouent les directeurs d'école dans l'établissement de la confiance relationnelle comme condition préalable pour l'épanouissement d'une communauté professionnelle d'apprentissage. La confiance relationnelle semblant être critique au fonctionnement d'une communauté professionnelle d'apprentissage, il est peu probable qu'une amélioration significative puisse avoir lieu dans une école si on n'y prête pas attention.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) and Hord (2004) contend that the most promising avenue for creating sustained, substantive school improvement is by developing the ability of the teaching staff, or faculty, to function as a professional learning community. As much as professional learning communities are considered by most to be a best practice, little research examines the nature of the relationships that must exist in order to build and sustain professional learning communities and the role that principals play in developing these relationships (Little, 2003).

Although intuitively obvious to some, the human interactions in a professional learning community have proven difficult to capture (Little, 2003). Little states, "Relatively little research

examines the specific interactions by which professional community constitutes a resource for teacher learning and innovations in teaching practice” (p. 914). Toole and Louis (2002) argue that an examination of the shape and values of professional learning communities from the “voices from the field” is an “area ripe for additional research” (p. 274).

Thus in this study I sought the oral accounts of 12 principals who would not only bring the perspectives of their roles as leaders, but whose work is very much situated in the daily interactions among faculty in the ongoing dynamics of a school. A diverse pool of principals representing varied contexts and viewpoints was sought. Nine of the participants were female and three were male. Seven were from private or independent schools and five from public schools. Two small schools were represented, as were four large schools, and six medium-sized schools. Finally, urban, suburban, and rural school communities were each represented in this study. Bringing key “voices from the field” into conversation allows us to gain a more complete understanding of principals’ perceptions of what kinds of adult relationships are required and how these relationships develop in schools striving to become professional learning communities.

Trust and Professional Learning Communities

Even without a precise definition of a professional learning community, an understanding of the human relations that exist in schools offers significant insight into leadership studies (Spillane & Louis, 2002). A professional learning community, however defined, often has as one of its purposes the development of the kinds of adult relationships that can support individual change in classrooms across a whole school (Spillane & Louis, 2002; Toole & Louis, 2002). The principal plays a key role in nurturing these relationships, which ultimately affect the extent to which schools can be characterized as professional learning communities (Barth, 2006; Hord, 1997; Sparks, 2005). Crow, Hausman, and Scribner (2002) emphasize the importance of relationships in their model of professional learning communities that comprise three concentric circles. The innermost circle represents the relationships that exist between teachers and children, and the outermost ring signifies the relationships between the teaching faculty and the community at large. The middle ring represents relations among the faculty in a school. It is this middle ring, which mediates between the outside world and the inner workings of the classroom, that is the focus of this article. The terrain wherein principals and members of a faculty engage in their work with one another is not necessarily obvious to the outside community, or even to the students in a classroom. Therefore, exploring this middle circle of faculty interaction provides an entry into an exploration of principals’ understandings of what constitutes effective relationships among teachers and between teachers and principals.

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) assert that trust among faculty may well be the foundation of school effectiveness, which complements Barth’s (1990) sentiment that positive adult relationships in schools are the basis of school improvement. As Tschannen-Moran (2004) states,

Professional learning communities are based on trust that teachers and principals will act with the best interests of students in mind by researching best practices and pursuing data to bolster decision making (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996; Goldring & Rallis, 1993; Louis et al., 1996). (pp. 107-108)

The outer ring of community tends to have this sort of expectation of the trustworthiness of teachers. However, in the faculty, the notion of trust is even more nuanced; it takes into account everything from care for one another to the ability to withstand serious critique. Fullan (1999) claims that in order to improve student outcomes school-wide, success will only be possible “if organizational members develop trust and compassion for each other” (p. 37). According to Hargreaves (2007), strong and sustainable professional learning communities are

Characterized by strong cultures of trusted colleagues who value each other personally and professionally, who are committed to their students, who are willing to discuss and disagree about evidence and data that can inform them about how to improve their practices in ways that benefit their students—and who are willing to challenge one another’s practice in doing so. (p. 188)

It is evident that among faculty members looking to improve their schools as professional learning communities, a commitment to trust is frequently regarded as an important precondition.

Relational Trust and Professional Learning Communities

Although there are various conceptualizations of trust (for other examples, see Etzioni, 1988; Fukuyama, 1995), a useful delineation that will provide a structure for this study is offered by Bryk and Schneider (2002). Bryk and Schneider present three conceptions of trust, specifically, organic, contractual, and relational trust. The first, organic trust, is based on the absolute belief in the moral authority of an institution. This type of trust, requiring both consensus about beliefs and a shared moral vision, is unconditional and results in strong social bonds and a relatively clear institutional identity. A strong cultural group in a community might have organic trust among its members who all possess knowledge of the expectations and the behaviors necessary to keep their traditions going and essentially agree on them. Schools with particular charters such as a specifically religious character may have certain aspects of their trust relationships that are organic, unquestioned, and assumed. Although organic notions of trust might work in some organizational contexts, the presumption of some sort of long-term shared history inherent in situations where organic trust might function well is not appropriate in the diverse, pluralistic social environment found in most schools today.

A second conception of organizational trust, namely, contractual trust, according to Bryk and Schneider (2002), is largely instrumental. In this form of trust, mutual performance expectations among contracting parties are narrowly defined and breaches are easily observed. Contractual trust implies the potential for one party to breach a contract and be held accountable, but usually there is some distance between the two parties. The trust required in most business transactions, which are often conducted while either party retains some degree of anonymity or at least professional distance, can be contractual without seeming to be cold. Also the limited nature of contracts allows for specifications of the entire scope of a promised transaction. How could the expectations around a teacher’s work ever be reducible to a few clear-cut statements or a binary understanding of “job done” versus “job not done”? This second type of social trust also appears not to fit organizational analyses of schools because performance expectations for teachers, although arguably instrumental in part, are multiple and interrelated such that separating one teacher’s effect on one student, for example, is unrealistic. When a contractual trust concept is applied to schools, it becomes difficult to determine if teachers are meeting diverse expectations. The expectations of what teachers are to do are not as

clear or easy to delineate as they may be in some other types of organizations where expectations are often simply unitary and measures of success are more quantifiable.

Noting the theoretical inadequacies of organic and contractual trust for analyzing the adult relationships in schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) propose the notion of relational trust, anchored in the social exchanges attached to key role relationships found in schools. The interrelationships that can be formed among teacher, parent, student, and administrator groups are the focus of this approach. Relational trust describes the extent to which there is consonance with respect to each group's understanding of its and the other group's expectations and obligations. For example, when a principal holds views about his or her own responsibilities and the responsibilities of teachers that are consistent with those held by the teachers themselves, then there is a match in assumed values, which in turn begins to build a foundation for the growth of trust. In order for relational trust to grow and be reinforced, however, both principal and teachers must observe the behavior of the other as consistent with these mutually held expectations. Bryk and Schneider argue that relational trust is an appropriate organizational property of schools because "its constitutive elements are socially defined in the reciprocal exchanges among participants in a school community, and its presence (or absence) has important consequences for the functioning of the school" (p. 22). In order to discover whether relational trust is indeed a key factor in building a foundation for professional learning communities, we look to the discourse in which principals engage about relationships, trust, and their schools as learning communities.

Method

A naturalistic inquiry approach was used to examine principals' perceptions of professional learning communities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). This approach to research focuses on naturally occurring activities in natural settings (Hatch, 2002). An extensive literature review provided a foundation of disciplinary knowledge and research on professional learning communities (Boote & Beile, 2005). The literature review guided the development of the focus group and individual interview questions (Kruger & Casey, 2000).

Following operational definitions established by Statistics Canada (Ertl & Plante, 2004), this study included 12 principals, two thirds of whom were female. Just over half of the principals came from private schools, and just under half from public schools. One sixth of the principals came from small schools, half from medium-sized schools, and one third from large schools. The 12 schools were geographically located in a mix of urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout Manitoba. In addition, two thirds of the principals worked in elementary schools (i.e., schools that offer kindergarten to grade 6 or most elementary grades), a quarter worked in secondary schools (i.e., schools that offer grades 7-12 or most secondary grades), and one of the 12 worked in a mixed school (i.e., a school that offers all elementary and secondary grades.) Table 1 illustrates the operational definitions used in the study to determine school size as small, medium, or large.

Two focus groups ($n=6$ for each) and 12 individual interviews were held over six months to investigate the general research question: What characteristics are identified by principals in their conceptions of schools as professional learning communities? Two 90-minute sessions with the focus groups were followed by semistructured individual interviews with the same 12 participants over a five-month period (Kvale, 1996).

Table1
School Size as Defined by Statistics Canada (Ertl & Plante, 2004)

		<i>School type</i>		
		<i>Elementary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Mixed</i>
School size	Small	Less than 200 students	Less than 300 students	Less than 60 students
	Medium	200 to 350 students	300 to 700 students	60 to 200 students
	Large	More than 350 students	More than 700 students	More than 200 students

The focus groups allowed participants to interact and state ideas, perceptions, and beliefs that they might not have expressed had they only been interviewed individually (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). The subsequent individual interviews were designed to extend, further describe, and understand the meanings of the responses made by the focus groups' participants (Kvale, 1996). Each individual interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Kvale contends that follow-up interviews such as these can provide an opportunity to probe more deeply with individuals than focus groups would allow, to clarify participants' responses by asking supplemental questions, and to pay more attention to significant nonverbal cues.

The methodological approach used in the analysis was designed to produce data that could undergo a form of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thematic analysis allowed for a variety of priorities or topics to emerge (Boyatzis, 1998). The process involves the classification of themes through "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258) that "is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis" (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, pp. 3-4). Unlike a template approach to thematic analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), in which a template is created from a codebook and then is applied as a means of organizing data in the form of text, this approach to analysis began with all the discernible content of the data (i.e., the entire transcripts of the two focus groups and the 12 interviews, 320 pages of double-spaced text) so that the possibility of discovering themes not identified in the extant body of related research, that is, unanticipated themes, could emerge.

The process was iterative: as analysis progressed, themes were clarified, refined, and amended. The thematic analysis followed a customary procedure for conducting such types of qualitative analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), which consists of two major stages before moving on to synthesizing the data with wider theory and literature. First, the focus group and interview transcripts were read and reread carefully to identify emerging codes and potential categories. This involved a process of reducing the text to small units, organizing, and reorganizing according to an initial category, thus creating a large mass of data segments and annotations (McLeod, 2001). I acknowledge that the categories identified did not stem only from the data, but were indisputably influenced by the literature review and my experience and values (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Although it is accepted that these factors contribute to the conceptualizing

process, I took care to ensure that the categories reflected the data and that the categories fitted the data rather than forcing the data to fit the categories.

Comparing and contrasting techniques (Tesch, 1990) were used to establish categorical boundaries, systematically assign data segments to categories, summarize the content of each category, and search for negative cases. The purpose of these analytical procedures was to detect conceptual similarities, to refine the differences between categories, and to discover patterns. This process led to the establishment of the broader themes from the data and was a continuation of an inductive process in which the broader themes fitted the categories. This resulted in a composite account of the principals' experiences drawing on the strong and recurrent themes found across categories (Boyatzis, 1998).

Findings

In analyzing the discourse of principals about relational trust and its role in schools striving to develop as professional learning communities, five key themes emerged that seemed to be shared among the study participants regardless of their unique school context or experience. The five themes offered as propositions are: trust develops as teachers are in relationship; relational trust requires establishing group norms around risk-taking and change orientation in order to foster a safe, comfortable climate for professional growth; relational trust supports effective collaboration; the principal is central in establishing a climate of trust; and the faculty requisite trust of the principal is paramount. These themes appear to support the assertion that robust social relationships among faculty and between faculty members and a principal are critical preconditions for the formation of a professional learning community (Toole & Louis, 2002). Using pseudonyms to provide the participants with anonymity, excerpts are presented to illustrate the selected themes.

Theme 1: Trust Develops as Teachers are in Relationship

A number of the participants expressed views about the influence of faculty relationships on the development of trust. They noted variously how the inherently interconnected roles that teachers play as members of a faculty enable and necessitate that they not only know each other, but that they develop trusting relationships. Principal Mist, for example, commented on the power that trusting relationships have on reflective teaching practice, "It [school improvement] all comes back to community, relationships, rapport and trust." In addition, Principal White noted that trust among faculty only develops as teachers work together and discuss matters of importance when she explained, "I think that it [trust] develops more from working together and discussing how students are performing across the grades, and what we can do to support their learning." Or as Principal Cyan remarked, "I think collaboration will only come about when there is no longer that sort of wondering, 'well, what's this person all about?'" Comments such as these appear to suggest that the participants regarded the adult relationships in the school as critical to the development of faculty trust.

Theme 2: Relational Trust Requires Establishing Group Norms Around Risk-Taking and Change Orientation in Order to Foster a Safe, Comfortable Climate for Professional Growth

The principals expressed beliefs that relational trust develops when group norms are such that complex conversations about change and school improvement can occur in an atmosphere of respect. Principal Teal suggested that norms of trust were prerequisites for building professional learning communities. As she explained,

It was years ago that I first started learning about professional learning communities and I knew right away that I wanted to have one functioning in any school that I was in. The amount of work that it took was enormous to get us to the place where our norms were established and trust could be built. And, then we began to have conversations about changing our practice and improving student learning.

Many of these principals identified a normative school climate as the strongest facilitator for developing the kind of trust that supports teachers as they move toward establishing a professional learning community.

Principal Mist stated, “One of the assumptions I've always had is that you need to have established some ground rules among staff before you can have effective conversations about student learning.” In addition, Principal White remarked, “I don't think we can get people to change unless they feel that there is trust, and that it's safe to change. You need to have a climate of trust that supports change, and then you will see progress.” It appears that these principals regarded the institution of shared group norms of safety, risk-taking, and change orientation as mechanisms for teachers to trust each other so that they might collectively address compelling problems of student learning.

The corollary also appeared to be true. When asked to describe the factors that could limit the development of schools as professional learning communities, the participants remarked that a lack of trust among the teaching staff was an impediment. Principal Cyan noted, “Just as trust facilitates the growth of professional learning communities, a lack of trust could foster cultures of fear or defensiveness that inhibits their development.” Risk-taking without a precondition of trust would appear to be unlikely. Principal Mustard described why lack of trust could be a limiting factor for a school trying to become a professional learning community when she suggested, “There's a fear of putting things on the table. I think the lack of trust is the real inhibitor to a professional learning community.”

The principals indicated that trust allows teachers to feel comfortable with each other and to work and learn more effectively together. Principal Khaki commented, “In a professional learning community, the word *community* is paramount and teaching is better if there is trust.” Principal Green viewed trust as an essential element of her conception of a professional learning community when she noted, “Professionally, teachers need to feel comfortable with their colleagues so that other teachers can come into their rooms and perhaps help them to grow and to develop.”

These principals believe that relational trust promotes a sense of comfort and security that allows teachers to open up and share, which in turn leads them to begin to question their work more effectively. The ability to take critiques comfortably and be open to changing methods contributes to the faculty's overall collective professional growth. As Principal Sienna observed, “It requires a lot of trust for people to feel like they can move out of their teaching comfort

zones. It's difficult to get that." Trust among faculty was seen as essential for the kind of learning and unlearning that might lead to school-wide professional growth among teachers.

Theme 3: Relational Trust Supports Effective Collaboration

The principals in this study believe that trust and respect among faculty are fundamental if teachers are expected to open up and discuss their ideas about teaching and learning with colleagues. They believe that trust among faculty can lead to collaboration and reflective dialogue. As Principal Coral noted, "I think trust is the foundation ... We can't jump into collective professional development until people have had the opportunity to develop trust in each other ... Then I think collaboration will occur." Principal Blue noted that trust is the basis for the kind of teacher collaboration required to be a professional learning community by suggesting, "In order to see collaboration as a staff, people need to trust each other, which leads to an openness to share ideas and have conversations about where they see room for improvement." The participants regarded relational trust as a necessary social condition that allowed teachers to come together and work collaboratively on ideas that could potentially improve teaching to benefit students' learning.

Theme 4: The Principal is Central in Establishing a Climate of Trust

The participants commented that principals assist schools in becoming professional learning communities by supporting the performance of teachers through being connected to all members of their faculty and through developing strong relational trust between themselves and their faculty. The participants mentioned that as principals, they play a key role in developing and nurturing a school climate that reinforces the practices required of professional learning communities. As Principal Mist said, "Norms get set in lots of ways. Principals have a massive influence on that, whether they like it or. A nod from them can wreck a conversation or improve it. We try sometimes to avoid being so influential, but it happens." In addition, Principal Green commented, "What keeps staff relations at a good level is the fact that my office door is always open. There's listening, a lot of talking, a lot of communication and a lot of individual reassurance."

Other indicators of the important role that principals play in developing relational trust occurred when participants remarked that they needed to stay connected with the faculty, interact with them, and exchange information regularly. Principal Khaki noted that teachers look to the principal to maintain organizational stability by offering cohesion. "They're looking for us to bring some stability and build some cohesion and calmness, whatever is needed in that day. We have a perspective on the staff's state of mind as we do our rounds." In their estimation, when principals are connected to faculty, teachers feel valued and are more likely to commit to school-wide improvement efforts.

Principal Cyan commented on the effort required to establish a trusting relationship with the teaching staff when she stated, "It takes an enormous amount of energy to extend yourself to become a group of people who can move forward together to improve student learning and it requires trust."

These principals noted that although nurturing the kinds of relationships between teachers that leads to the types of behaviors and dispositions required to develop schools as professional

learning communities was difficult, it was their responsibility as leaders to work with teachers to establish a climate of trust.

Theme 5: Faculty Requisite Trust of the Principal is Paramount

These principals also expressed beliefs that the trust shown toward them by their respective faculty members had a profound effect on their abilities to nurture their schools as professional learning communities. Principal Cyan remarked that before one can embark on conversations about becoming a professional learning community, “You first have to have their [the teachers] trust.” Principal White supported this notion of trust of principal as a requisite condition when she reiterated, “You need to build their trust.”

As Principal Sienna remarked, her faculty’s trust in her as principal was crucial because as she commented, “I push, I influence, I discuss ... I’m in the center of a web of relationships ensuring that everyone is somehow connected.” The participants expressed the strong belief that trust between the collective faculty and the principal is a critical factor in developing schools as professional learning communities, and that the lack of it will doom principals to failure. Principal Mustard commented, “What inhibits us from moving forward as a professional learning community is a lack of trust. Teachers sometimes wonder, ‘Why is administration doing this?’”

The principals noted that members of a faculty look to the principal to see if she or he is consistent in words, actions, and deeds before deciding on the extent to which they will commit to follow the principal as leader. The participants commented that trust between faculty and principal was of critical importance to their effective functioning as leaders in their schools. Principal Mist explained the effect of broken trust on leadership when he said, “Although we learn management and leadership in graduate school, you soon realize that all of the theory can become meaningless in a heartbeat and it can turn on a very small thing. Leadership really comes down to trust.” Principal Olive stated on another occasion, “Trust is a very interesting thing. We all know that trust can be lost very easily. Trust is built with experiences where the principal does things that make you feel like you can have confidence in her to keep her word.”

These principals believed that trust is best developed when teachers perceive few gaps between what the principal says and does. Principal Mustard articulated that trust is based on authenticity when she noted that she found herself telling faculty, “What you see here is what you get. In order to see real improvement school-wide we need each other. There is an interdependence built on the notion that I need the faculty to trust me and I need to trust them.” Principal Olive commented that trust between the faculty and principal was built incrementally over time as she observed, “Trust is built on daily interaction. Every day you have to be a consistent person. You have got to be there for them and be very consistent. I think that is how you build trust.” In this regard, these principals acknowledged that trust was not given blindly. It had to be earned.

Trust was seen as an essential element in successful school improvement initiatives in the professional community, especially if teachers were to follow and support a principal’s efforts to improve student outcomes school-wide. Principal Mist claimed, “I have a good level of trust with my staff. I tested it not too long ago and had a difficult situation that turned out well in the end. The staff trusted me, they hung in there with me and it worked out.”

Principal Sienna remarked that in order to develop functional trusting relationships between herself and her teachers collectively, there was a requirement for vigilance over relational

boundaries, “You have to be able to step back from the relationships that you have individually with teachers in order to make good decisions that impact the entire staff.” In addition, Principal Green reported that with trust there needed to be a positive relationship between the principal and teachers so that they could discuss important matters of teaching and learning. She said, “Trust and communication are necessary because if staff feels there is a hidden agenda ... you will have problems. There needs to be an openness of communication if you want to see improvements.” These principals expressed beliefs that building and sustaining one-to-one relationships with the teachers via communicative and supportive behaviors was one of the overarching trust-promoting behaviors of the principal.

Discussion

The naturalistic approach used in this study involved two six-member focus groups followed by individual interviews. In this case, the focus groups preceded the individual interviews because it was hoped that the collective nature of a small group might stimulate participants to recognize and state feelings, perceptions, and beliefs that they might not express if interviewed individually (Gall et al., 2003). The follow-up interviews were opportunities for principals to reveal their individual thought processes and to reflect further on what had emerged in the focus group discussion. Revisiting comments made during the focus group sessions allowed for deeper probing to uncover individual meanings and interpretations (Gall et al., 2003; Kvale, 1996). Although there are strengths to a methodological approach that uses focus groups and individual interviews such as allowing participants to answer questions as they see fit and allowing the researcher to probe deeper into initial responses to gain more detailed answers, there are inherent weaknesses, namely, that standardized questions may constrain and limit the naturalness and relevance of the responses (Gall et al., 2003; Patton, 1990). Arguably, participant observation of a self-identified effective professional learning community at work might have proved to be more naturalistic than the focus groups and interviews, and might have provided complementary or contradictory data to the words of the study’s participants (Gall et al., 2003). Yet even this approach to research has its weaknesses: such an approach would require a group to be identified or to self-identify as an effective professional learning community, would necessitate extensive amounts of time in the field observing the group, and is subject to bias as the observer documents and then interprets the data he or she feels is noteworthy (Gall et al., 2003).

Because this study was limited in size to 12 distinct principals’ voices, and because larger samplings might generate other findings or emphases in the findings of this particular study, it is important to note that this study is not intended to reflect the perceptions of the more than 800 principals employed in all Manitoba schools. However, the results of this intensive, narrative-based, and interactive research study support Toole and Louis’s (2002) assertion that the kinds and quality of the adult relationships that exist in schools affect understandings of professional learning communities.

The findings clearly emphasize the importance of trusting relationships among faculty and between teachers and the principal and align with much of the literature on professional learning communities. Positive professional relationships among faculty enhance teaching and support students’ learning in a school (Barth, 2006). The key element in developing the kinds of collegial relationships that encourage professional conversations, allow teachers to share their expertise and accumulated wisdom, and provide opportunities for collective learning—all

constitutive elements of professional learning communities—is trust (Barth; Toole & Louis, 2002). The principals in this study clearly indicated that not only was trust necessary to build professional learning communities, but that a lack of trust impeded all movement toward its development. This aligns well with Hargreaves (2007), who suggests that trust is the backbone of a strong and sustaining professional learning community. Trust was seen as an indispensable resource for school improvement efforts.

The principals in this study identified relational trust as conceptualized by Bryk and Schneider (2002) as the strongest facilitating factor for developing schools as professional learning communities. These principals regarded relational trust as the non-negotiable social condition that acts as a foundation for the kinds of mature adult relationships necessary in professional learning communities. Although the principals viewed the constitutive role of structural support conditions on their perceptions of professional learning communities, they indicated that relational trust was the glue required to cohere teaching staff to a common purpose of improving students' outcomes school-wide. Consequently, it appears that principals need to understand that supportive conditions alone such as time and spaces to meet do not ensure the changes required in teachers' collective practices for schools to become professional learning communities. As was evident in the responses of the principals in this study, trust provided the foundation for dealing with sensitive issues or topics that otherwise would be left unattended regardless of their importance. At its core, then, trust is interpersonal; it exists in some state between two people. In a group, interpersonal connections become multifold, complex, and interdependent. These principals viewed themselves as brokers of relationships among teachers, which is important because the aggregate status of organizational trust in turn strongly influences the cohesiveness and effectiveness of any school (Groenewegen, 2006).

As Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) assert, trust is a complex concept that is difficult to define. However, as is evident in the findings of this study, relational trust is foundational to the functioning of school systems and is generated in the middle concentric circle of intra-faculty relations. School systems are built on the belief that parents can trust that teachers are doing what they should be doing in classrooms and that principals are doing what they should be doing in their offices. Ultimately, a school is entrusted with facilitating learning in all children (Kochanek, 2005). Similarly, relational trust is vital in schools because teachers need to be able to assume that their colleagues are acting appropriately behind classroom doors (Kochanek, 2005).

In order to see the kind of change necessary for students to improve learning outcomes school-wide, principals need to do more than listen to the facts and circumstances discussed by faculty. They need to form and nurture trusting relationships that allow them to go beneath the surface matters typically discussed among teachers and engage them in conversations at deeper emotional levels about student achievement school-wide (Ciancutti & Steding, 2001). Finally, principals need to realize that to build trust with teachers, “it takes time, effort, and considerable resources,” and the establishment of a proper environment (Jones & George, 1998).

Conclusion

A primary purpose of this study was to provide a meaningful description of principals' perceptions of the adult relationships required for schools striving to be professional learning communities. The five themes identified are perhaps somewhat predictable if taken individually, but taken together they provide a basis for practitioners and researchers to understand better

what constitutes principals' notions of relational trust, as well as the significant role that it plays in understanding how a diverse group of teachers might potentially be transformed into an effective, professional learning community. In the discourse of learning communities, the notion of trust is articulated as being relational in its orientation and developed around group norms of safety, risk-taking, and change orientation, which have the effect of fostering collaboration and promote willingness among faculty to grow professionally. In addition, the final two themes speak specifically of the important role that principals play in establishing relational trust as a precondition for the growth of a professional learning community.

The findings of this study indicate that principals' professional knowledge, expertise, and determination to nurture their teaching staffs as professional learning communities will fall flat if relational trust among the faculty is absent. Importantly, in this sense, trust requires increased focus on and visibility of the adult social relationships in schools. Relational trust has to be built and sustained, and it has to be active. Principals need work continually in the social network of the school to nurture trust, and this takes time, commitment, and effective communication.

Given the importance that these principals placed on the development of trusting relationships, future research is needed to deepen understandings of how relational trust works and is nurtured in professional learning communities. In addition, future studies about what is required for trust to be regained if it is lost may be instructive for those who seek to develop schools as professional learning communities.

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