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TRUST IN THE CONTEMPORARY PRINCIPALSHIP

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The social relevance of trust and the principals' obligation to foster trust in schools have been strongly advocated. This paper describes an in-depth, qualitative study that engaged a group of twenty-five Canadian school principals over a period of seven months, exploring the issues of trust as it affects principals' roles and responsibilities. Four central concerns were identified by the participants: i) defining trust, ii) establishing trust, iii) maintaining trust, and iv) trust breaking. The principals' multiple relationships produce a complex web of issues related to trust; including intensity of relationships and the contingent role of school principals in trust brokering within learning communities. This research has further established a basis for on-going examination of the nature, extent, and effect of trust relationships in the lives of school administrators.

Introduction

In recent years, the social relevance of trust has been well established in the social

sciences and the obligation to foster trust in the work place and learning environments of

schools has been strongly advocated. Trust is a fundamental concept in our lives and language.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in school organizations, learning organizations, and

professional communities. The importance and pervasiveness of trust (or its betrayal or

absence) are implicit in our every effort to establish communities of learners and generative

settings for the expression of our shared educational ambitions. In their extensive study of

school reform in Chicago, Bryk and Schneider (2002, p. 5) conclude "that a broad base of trust across school community lubricates much of a school's day-to-day functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans." The word "trust," and its derivations, has often been invoked by writers in the field of educational leadership as something present, desirable, or necessary; but this concept have less often been explored or explicated. Exceptions to this observation are noteworthy in the works of some writers including: Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998; 2000); Tschannen-Moran (1997; 2004); Tarter, Sabo, and Hoy (1995); Hoffman, Sabo, Bliss, and Hoy (1994); Hoy, Tarter and Witkoskie (1992); Tarter, Bliss and Hoy (1989); Bryk and Schneider (2002); Bottery (2003); Gimbel (2003); MacMillan, Meyer and Northfield (2004; 2005); Adams (2008); and Forsyth (2008). These authors addressed and analyzed trust as a conceptual and empirical construct. They indicated that trust is a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional phenomenon that is related to a number of crucial variables concerning effectiveness of school organizations, human relationships, and behaviour. Trust, it was suggested, "operates within the cognitive and psychological domain as a motive for behaviour, at the interpersonal level to shape social exchanges, and within organizations to influence collective performance" (Adams, 2008, p. 30). However, as Hoffman, Sabo, Bliss, and Hoy (1994) summarized, "despite the popularity of trust as a topic for commentary, and admonition, there is relatively little systematic research on trust in public schools" (p. 485). Trust is important and needs to be researched with greater intensity as we consider various dimensions of educational reform and evaluation.

To meet the challenges presented by changes and complexities in education, educational leaders, such as school principals must learn to integrate deliberative reflection and dialogical competence into each role function, relationship, and decision. School principals

need to recognize the deliberative dimensions of every step and circumstance in the making, outworking, and implementing of their various agency roles and relationships. Further, school principals work as dual and multiple agents in relationships with variable salience, tensions, and potencies. With these challenges, Gardner (1995) suggested, "the only hope for vitality in large-scale organizations is the willingness of a great many people throughout the organization to take the initiative in identifying problems and solving them" (p. 152). Fundamental to these understandings are questions related to the nature of the school principal's role as moral agent and how, in this role, s/he judges and makes decisions and fosters community trust, not only in themselves and the "institution of education," but between and among students, parents, community members, staff members, schools, central administration, provincial authorities, interagency personnel, and the general public.

As indicated, scholars in the field of educational administration have begun to conduct research into the nature of trust in the work of school principals. Many years ago, several researchers pointed out that there are few "systematic attempts to describe, analyze and explain everyday administration as it [is] experienced by people, let alone to seek to learn from those experiences" (Gronn, 1987, pp. 105-106), and that past "approaches for understanding and shaping human activities ... have failed to take full account of the major dimensions of human existence, namely, the deliberative-moral" (Enns, 1981, p. 1). In part, these observations still hold true; it is as if these words were written within the last few years. The end of 20th and beginning of 21 centuries were marked by some attempts to clarify these issues. Researchers such as Begley (1999), Begley and Leonard (1999), Strike and Temasky (1993), Sergiovanni (1992; 2000), Bottery (2003, 1992), Leithwood and Musella (1991), Hodgkinson (1991), Maxcy (1991), Ashbaugh and Kasten (1991), led the way as contributors to the development of

this moral-ethical domain in educational administration, but the field remains relatively unexplored, especially in relation to the school principal's moral agency.

Most studies on educational leaders have attended to leader practices; but much less attention has been given to the internal processes and issues of trust. It can not be disputed that how leaders feel and think will influence what they do. Work in the area of micro-politics and school-based policy making has only scratched the surface for the understanding of trust and the role of principal as the moral agent and mediator of trusting relationships. It has been over 15 years since Leithwood (1992) recommended that future research devote more energy to understanding the attitudes, values, beliefs, traits, and dispositions of leaders. But like the earlier calls, Leithwood's suggestions have produced relatively few studies in the area of trust and moral agency in the work of school principals. In one of the more recent studies, Gimbel (2003) found that for principals an underlying dimension of the meaning of trust was in the one-to-one relationships they were sustaining with their teaching staffs. This author indicated that "interpersonal trust involved the principals demonstrating reliability, consistency, and follow-through" (Gimbel, 2003, p. 45). However, more information is needed as to how school principals understand and operationalize the effects of trust in their personal and professional relationships. How does trust affect the roles and responsibilities of school principals? Conversely, it is important to know how the school principal engenders trust in his/her relationships with staff, students, parents, and community.

For the purpose of our study, we tentatively stipulated that trust was a moral resource or a type of social capital that entailed being vulnerable in regard to others (when trusting) and being considered both predictable and safe in relationship (when trusted). Given this very broad conceptual framework, the purposes of this study were to:

- describe and analyze principals' experiences of trust in contemporary schools;
- develop an understanding of how trust affects educational settings and the extent to which an understanding of trust can explain effectiveness of educational leadership.

We entered into this study believing there would be many understandings and expressions of trust but that these would revolve around thresholds of interdependence, motivations, and choices in relationships.

Methodology

This study was designed as an in-depth, qualitative approach to engage a group of Canadian principals in exploring with others the issues of trust as these affected their roles and responsibilities. The twenty-five participating principals were nominated by their superintendents and invited by the researchers to participate in series of five in-depth interactive group sessions over a period of seven months. The principals ranged in experience from 1-15 years in principal role, two-thirds of participants were female and their schools represented elementary, K-12 and high school sectors. We had asked superintendents to nominate principals who, in their opinion, had high social intelligence and who were doing well in their principalship. The sustained contact with these principals was important from two perspectives. First, the participants had to develop personal and professional trust with each other in order to share their experiences and exchange their insights. Second, the participants needed time to engage in the group sessions, to reflect on the context and content of the sessions, and to carefully consider their own positions on issues raised in the study sessions.

In collaboration, the researchers determined the topics for the workshops with the participating principals. Each workshop followed a similar process, but the topics for discussion were guided by the interests and perspectives of the participants. For example the first workshop

session focused on what, in their experiences, had constituted good relationships and how might poor relationships be described. Typically each of the workshops began with a brief trust-related presentation. Topics included, but were not limited to, participants' past or current experiences with developing and sustaining trust, reflections on theoretical or conceptual ideas of trust in professional relationships, and the effects of trust in the multiple relationships of school administrators. Following the introductory presentation, participants (in pairs) interviewed a colleague using a semi-structured interview. The interviews were taped, transcribed, and shared with the participants as sources of discussion at the following session. Following the paired interviews, an unstructured round table discussion on a trust-related topic provided the participants an opportunity to share viewpoints and perspectives of trust-related experiences. These sessions were also taped and transcribed for future use.

The intensive, narrative-based, and interactive approach to explore principals' experiences of trust produced a large volume of transcribed interviews and group discussions. The data analysis process involved three stages. First, the researchers and two assistants analyzed the transcripts to identify themes and principals' insights that could lead to an understanding of principals' lived experiences of trust. Second, using this (inside) approach, the researchers then sought to reconstruct the principals' narratives into a meaningful description and explanation of the role of trust in school leadership. Third, the participating principals reviewed the reconstructed narratives and provided their interpretation of the reconstructed paired and group discussions.

The analysis of the transcripts provided a rich source of data that showed that the discussions of the twenty-five principals ranged over a variety of topics, issues, personal experiences, and observations. The analysis was undertaken using a constant comparison

methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a process that provides both descriptive and explanatory categories when processing narrative data.

Results

The analysis that stemmed from this study produced four general themes that captured the principals' experiences of trust in a contemporary school setting. The four themes included: (i) the effects of the changing role of the principal; (ii) the effects of trust on principals' personal and professional relationships; (iii) the effects of trust broken; and (iv) the effects of hope as it relates to developing and maintaining trust in a contemporary school environment.

The Changing Role of the Principal

The principals emphasized strongly that the changes in the role of the principal influenced their understanding of trust. They pointed out that school leadership and management has changed over the past number of years. In the era of professional learning communities, the nature of trust and the principalship has changed from one in which the principal is expected to know all the answers to one where the principal is a broker of information and relationships and a mediator of values and decision making. The perceived importance of developing an inclusive environment in order to establish an ethos of trust was raised by many principals as they spoke of the necessity of including everyone in most decision-making and ensuring that all stakeholders (including teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, and students) feel that they have a voice in decision-making that affects them directly. The changing role of the principal has influenced principals' perceptions of trust on the job. Another consequence of the changing role of the principal has been the introduction of a measure of uncertainty in the work lives of principals. One of the sub-themes that emerged from the principals' comments is that if there is to be trust

then the actions of both principals and staff members must be predictable. Consistent with

Tschannen-Moran (2004) and MacMillan (2004, 2005), according to the principals,

predictability has the effect of reducing uncertainty in the professional relationships within the

school. One of the principals commented:

> *We need to trust what the other person will do and we need to be able to predict*
> *what the other person will do. Our best experiences have come when we have*
> *been able to do that and our worst experiences have been when people have let us*
> *down and we haven't been able to trust them, they have surprised us.*

Principals felt the need for more predictability in their roles and relationships with others (staff,

students, parents).

Relationship Intensity

A second theme in the principals' comments focussed on the effects of trust in the lives of

contemporary principals, specifically the personal and professional relationships. Issues of trust

tended to evoke emotional reactions and response, voiced and observed as the principals talked

about various situations. Principals stated that trust was dependent upon an individual's feelings

that he or she could know what to expect from others. Some principals also spoke of safety; that

staff members felt trust once they knew that the social or work environment was safe. They

indicated that creating a sense of safety involved some predictability and consistency in the

manner that relationships function. One important aspect of trust was expressed in terms of the

intensity of the relationships in schools today. One principal used the phrase "moving to the

danger" to describe the nature of some of the principals' personal and professional relationships.

By this, the principal meant that in order to garner the trust of people, he needed to demonstrate

that he could be counted upon to face issues, rather than retreat when the challenges are

presented. This, he thought, engendered trust. Principals spoke in terms of letting colleagues

know who they (the principals) really are as persons, and letting them (members of staff or other colleagues) become aware of the personal processes in their executive decision-making. However, it was pointed out that this aspect of trust tends to create feelings of vulnerability for the principal. As a principal said:

> *The one that jumped out at me was vulnerability of the 'truster' because it's true that if I trust you I am vulnerable. If I'm sharing something with you or relying on you then I'm pretty vulnerable that you're going to keep your word on whatever the issue might be.*

Principals' professional relationships also had a strong influence on trust within a school's formal and informal social system. Several participants spoke of the importance of engaging with staff on a personal level.

> *I think if you work hard - you play hard. Staff socials are really important. I think it is really important to have your staff together and staff socials in this particular school are great. We will have ...[number] people out for staff socials. That's important.*

Principals also spoke of the value of personal interactions in building of trust. The personal interactions that allow trust to develop may require a "communicated vulnerability" that can be achieved through personal kinds of contact that go deeper than cliché conversations.

Trust Broken

The third theme in our study was the principals' concerns and reflections surrounding circumstances where trust had been broken. The participants noted that because of the personal and professional aspects of trust and its social/human context, there are times when trust will be broken. Principals were also sensitive to the causes of trust broken – some of which arose due to principals' reactions to staff issues or problems. Taking situations personally and taking themselves too seriously can lead to a breakdown in trust. Principals also spoke of moments

when staff members confide in them. They suggested that it is in such situations that they (principals) can get a measure of the extent to which they are trusted.

> *I think a lot of it is just people need somebody to talk to and why us I don't know. I feel good when that happens... That feels good when I have those experiences because it's like a report card at least someone trusts me and not that I don't think everybody does but I mean there's concrete evidence that somebody trusts me.*

The principals identified a breakdown in trust as a result of loss of integrity that ultimately caused situations and relationships to become unpredictable. As stated before, people look for predictability as predictability breeds trust. For principals, predictability in relationships and daily interactions was extremely important for effective leadership in schools.

Information sharing and open communication are bases for trust. It is believed that mistrust and resentment may result if staff members feel they are not getting the necessary information. As one principal put it, "The more information you share with people, the higher morale is (and) the higher the level of trust . . . We can't assume that they are going to trust us if you are holding back . . ." Although the principals responded that it was important to remain objective and not take things personally when trust is broken, they also emphasized the need for a balanced representation between objectivity and subjectivity in trusting relationships. In other words, they often felt the need to express their biases and concerns for feelings of others.

> *You know to a certain extent we feel too. You learn how to turn certain things off so you are very objective ... but I think if you ever lose that ability to feel, I'm not sure we're going to be as effective and it's that tension that we constantly have to deal with.*

Principals emphasized the importance of transparency in decision-making. They noted that trust is negatively affected when others believe that there is a lack of transparency on the part of the principal. The principals pointed out that effective communication and information sharing are essentials elements in transparency and trust building.

Hope in Trust

The fourth theme in the principals' comments spoke to the idea of "hope" as a factor in establishing and maintaining a positive trust relationship in the school. The idea of 'hope' was framed in the sense of anticipation or expectation especially in the context of the personal and professional relationships that engender trust in schools. The participants spoke of the value of demonstrating care for others in building trust, especially in difficult circumstances that can occur in schools from time to time. Expression of care for others seemed to help establish longer-lasting trusting relationships. However, the expression of hope that allows for openness and honesty when risk-taking, may also make principals vulnerable to those in whom they put their trust. Thus, from the principals' perspective the sense of hope can be seen as an important factor in generating and preserving trust in personal and professional relationships. The principals also spoke about a "high road" and the importance of demonstrating to staff that they were capable of making ethical choices in their decisions as principals. Respondents stated that staff members tended to appreciate decisions even if they did not agree with them as long as principals were perceived to be doing the right thing. These findings reminded us of Walker's (2006) claim that the first and last task of an educational leader is to foster hope.

Discussion

In order to better understand principals' experience of trust, two approaches to interpretation were undertaken. First, the results of the principals' discussions were examined from a heuristic perspective based on the four themes described earlier. Second, the results were examined in the context of a conceptual framework presented by Tschannen-Moran (2004).

With respect to the heuristic perspective, the four themes described above captured the nature and the effects of trust in the lives of a group of contemporary school principals. This interactive process included presenting personal experiences and observation, shared interpretation of those experiences, and interpreting the reconstruction of these experiences by others. Given this emergent design, one cannot claim that the reconstruction is "true". However, the principals' experiences seemed to be based on their ability in defining trust, establishing trust, maintaining trust, and coping with trust breaking.

In defining trust, the principals saw it based on predictability; that is, knowing what to expect, doing the right thing, showing empathy and honesty, communicating with others, and accepting accountability. For principals, the conditions for establishing trust were quite straightforward. Being a good listener, engaging in the social life of a school staff, and promoting an inclusive environment were important in establishing trust. On the other hand, maintaining trust was seen by principals as a more problematic task than the process of trust establishment. In fact, maintenance of trust was considered to be the most challenging of issues. Dealing with emerging challenges in a timely manner was one element of maintaining trust, as was being able to 'ask the right questions'. In contrast, the principals saw breaking trust to be a relatively easy process. Many incidents can result into broken trust between the principal and the school members of staff. Factors that may cause staff members to lose trust in the principal include failure to show objectivity in decision-making (probably as a result of hidden agenda) and loss of empathy (understanding) for staff members.

The second interpretation of the results was based on the model proposed by Tschannen-Moran (2004), in which trust is defined as "one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable and competent" (p. 17).

Using these five 'facets' of trust as conceptual framework provide a somewhat different interpretation of the principals' perceptions from that described earlier. *Benevolence* – the sense of caring, was one of the experiences of the principals involved in this study. Dealing with the feeling of vulnerability was one aspect of benevolence that the principals mentioned quite frequently. *Honesty*, especially the sense of integrity, was also identified by the participants as an important element of the principal's role. An important theme in the principals' accounts was the emphasis on communicating clearly and openly with their colleagues and staff. *Openness* was also described as being an important part of principals' experiences of trust. Although the principals noted that being open could make them vulnerable, they maintained that it also generates trust with others – i.e., reciprocal trust. *Reliability* was also one of the predominant elements of trust raised by the principals; the term "predictable" was used to describe the behaviours that contributed to the development of trusting relationships. As Tschannen-Moran (2004) pointed out, "teachers have greater confidence when they feel they can predict the behaviour of their principal" (p. 30). The fifth of the facets of trust, *competence* or principal's "ability to perform a task as expected, according to appropriate standards" (p. 30), was not clearly identified by the participants as a significant constituent of trusting relationships. It was not clear why principals did not comment more on this, but it is our presumption that competence is an attribute that could be better described by others rather than by principals themselves.

In summary, it is evident that the five facets of trust were, for the most part, considered by the twenty-five principals involved in this study. This supports the view that trust is an important element of leadership in a contemporary school. Successful principals seem to be able to understand that trust in theory and practice, is a necessary component of successful school

leadership. Principals seeking to be leaders of successful schools would benefit from understanding the role of trust in successful leadership.

Conclusion

A primary goal of this study was to provide a meaningful description of principals' perceptions of trust and its effect on principals' beliefs and behaviours. The interactive approach used in this study allowed the participants to articulate their ideas about trust, to have those ideas considered by colleagues, to reflect on one's own and others' ideas, and to consider the effect of those ideas. The four themes identified in the study are, in some ways, quite predictable but they do provide a framework for principals to better understand the role of trust in administrators' lives. This framework will be used to further explore trust relationships in more depth. Specifically, more extensive exploration is needed in some aspects of trust such as relationship intensity, and coping with broken trust. This research has helped establish a basis for on-going examination of the nature, extent, and effect of trust relationships in the lives of school administrators. Principals' multiple relationships (staff, students, parents, community, school board) produce a very complex web of issues related to trust. Future studies will explore such notions as relationship intensity and trust brokering to better understand the role of trust in the lives of contemporary school administrators.

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