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## The Trust Imperative in the School Principalship: The Canadian Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

As a fundamental concept in human interactions, trust is important for understanding and mediating the social structures in schools. The instrumental work of cultivating, brokering, and maintaining trust in schools lies within the role of the school administrator. Our exploratory study examined the Canadian school principals' perceptions of their moral agency and trust-brokering roles in schools. Upon reviewing the literature on the imperative of trust in school settings, we offer a phenomenological analysis of selected research findings. These findings are based on the responses of Canadian school principals (N = 177) who had reflected on their lived experiences of the personal, relational, decisional, educational, organizational, and moral imperatives of trust for school leaders.

Trust is a fundamental concept in everyday human interactions. As such, trust is important for understanding and mediating the social structures in school organizations, learning organizations, and professional communities. The importance and pervasiveness of trust (or its betrayal or absence) are implicit in our efforts to establish communities of learners and generative settings for the expression of our shared educational ambitions (Noonan, Walker, & Kutsyuruba, 2008). Despite the increased attention to the notion of trust within the field of education in recent decades (see Van Maele, Forsyth, & Van Houtte, 2014b), researchers claim that the phenomenon of trust experiences remains a contested terrain due to numerous challenges associated with understanding, defining, and researching trust (Schmidt, 2013).

We acknowledge that trust in educational settings involves multiple facets (individual or collective in nature) and, therefore, recognize the central role of the principal as a trust broker for themselves and others in schools. It seems to us that creating, sustaining, and fostering trust are imperative activities for school leaders and that cognizance of the fundamental importance of trust and trust dynamics are essential for successful

principalship. Foundational to this assumption are several theoretical perspectives: the *social-psychological* perspective of trust, which emphasizes the role of trust in interpersonal transactions (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996); the *relational* trust perspective, in which trust in school embodies the social exchanges around distinct sets of role relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Reina & Reina, 2006) and the perspective that trust provides a foundation of *social capital*, which is invaluable for the functioning of a school organization (Coleman, 1990). In addition, principals, as trust brokers and leaders in schools, are *moral agents* responsible for proactive shaping of the ethical contexts and environments in groups, organizations, and societies (Johnson, 2004; Starratt, 1991). As moral agents, principals are often required to judge and make decisions that foster 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 (Noonan et al., 2008). Central to much of the ethical leadership literature is the call for educational leaders to develop and articulate a much greater awareness of the ethical significance of their actions and decisions (Campbell, 1999), and we believe trust brokering is one of the means by which principals establish ethical and moral climates in schools.

Of course, schooling and the work of school leaders in different geopolitical and cultural settings are framed by the contextual and historic variables pertinent to those particular locales. In particular, this relates to public trust in schools. While general distrust is a part of a larger pattern shaped by economic, political, and social forces in some societies (Bottery, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2014b); in the case of Canada, schools and teachers still retain a fairly high level of public confidence (Roberts, Langlois, Clifton, Kampen, & Ferguson, 2005). For the most part, schooling in Canada is regarded as a positive social institution that provides many benefits for individuals and for society. However, significant demographic, economic, and cultural shifts have led to growing questions about the purposes of schools and how well the increasingly varied expectations are being met (Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2014). The purpose of our study was to examine the Canadian school principals' perceptions of their moral agency and trust-brokering roles in schools. Upon reviewing the extant literature on the importance of trust in schools and school leadership, we present our research findings that offer a phenomenological analysis of Canadian school administrators' ( $N = 177$ ) perceptions and reflections of lived experiences as these relate to the imperative nature of trust in the relationships mediated by school principals.

## Review of the Literature

### *The Nature of Trust*

Due to its complex and multifaceted nature, there is no one, agreed-upon definition of trust in the literature. Moreover, as Atkinson and Butcher (2003) noted, a universal definition is virtually impossible because trust is a socially constructed phenomenon. Through the synthesis of common definitions of trust, we have come to frame, by definition, the trust phenomenon as the extent to which one engages in a reciprocal interaction and a relationship in such a way that there is willingness to be vulnerable to another and to assume risk with positive expectations and a degree of confidence that the other party will possess some semblance of benevolence, care, competence, honesty, openness, reliability, respect, hope, and wisdom (Currall & Epstein, 2003; Daly, 2009; Day, 2009; Mishra & Mishra, 2013; Tschannen-Moran, 2014b; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). We offer this as a stipulatory definition in the absence of definitional consensus and given paradigmatic contestations.

Trust is often viewed as a dichotomous variable—a phenomenon that is either present or missing in the lived experiences of relationships. In this sense, relationships can either have or lack trust. Similarly, trust can be earned or lost, restored or broken. Alternatively, many settings may manifest mixtures or blends of trust, distrust, and mistrust. In this view, the dynamics of trust are expressed through changes in scale and intensity over the course of time and relationships, as expectations are either fulfilled or disappointed and as the nature of the interdependence between people changes (Heimer, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Critical events and unanticipated responses to those events can foster or diminish trust and alter thresholds for status of trust. In this sense, trust is viewed as a sliding spectrum, subject to incremental progresses and regresses, often described as a step-wise relationship. Degrees of trust and distrust are part of every human relationship. These two approaches to understanding trust are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. We believe trust can be best conceived of through the analysis of one's responses to the following question: "Do you trust [the particular person or group]?" The possible replies may be: (a) "Yes, I do;" (b) "No, I don't;" (c) "To a certain degree;" or (d) "Not sure." The dichotomous nature of the first two responses (which imply either a presence of trust or a need to assess, earn, or restore trust) and the incremental nature of the third response (which implies a notion of scale, degree, or threshold level of trust) have been noted above. However, in order to fully understand the nature of trust, it is necessary to also address the perspective contained in the latter response that indicates the feelings of uncertainty, doubt, and caution on behalf of the trusting person due to personal, organizational or other factors. Consistent with this antecedent literature, our research sought to more deeply appreciate the trust phenomenon through the reflections and perspectives of school principals' lived experiences.

### ***The Trust Imperative***

Trust is a critical existential need for complex and interdependent functioning at the societal, institutional, interpersonal, and personal levels (Bottery, 2004). According to Govier (1992), humans find that it is literally impossible to function without trust. Marshall (2000) outlined a number of reasons why trust matters. First of all, there is a biological need for trust. Beginning at birth, when we are vulnerable, exposed, and at risk, and while growing older, our biological need to trust persists and the levels of our trust are shaped by life experiences. In Marshall's view, "our ability to trust others will in large part be a function of how we have been treated and our ability to cope with the pressures of the workplace. Biological necessity becomes psychological reality" (p. 50). Psychologically, people need predictability, stability, consistency, and a sense of security to know where they stand with others and what they can count on to do their work well. Furthermore, psychological security through trust helps provide a level of emotional security or well-being of people. While uncertainty, fear, or disrespect contribute to lower levels of well-being, stability, safety, and respect not only increase our sense of well-being but also enhance our ability to trust others. Trust is also a cornerstone of self-respect, or the ground upon which we stand (Marshall, 2000). People have a positive sense of themselves if they trust and are trusted by others; whereas individuals who have low self-respect are likely to be more dependent on others for direction, be more fearful, and may have a high need for approval. Finally, trust is foundational for relationships: "without some modicum of trust, our relationships will be less than successful. Without trust, our relationships become merely transactions" (p. 52).

Therefore, trust is morally desirable from two perspectives. First, trust is often attributed to be a characteristic of human flourishing within community—a form of excellence within individuals that also enables the community to thrive. Second, the emotional states associated with trust suggest its goodness (Wicks, Berman, & Jones, 1999). Baier (1994) noted that mutual trust in relationships provides a critical basis for good states of heart and mind such as self-esteem and a sense of security. In contrast, when people feel distrust toward others or are not trusted by others, their self-esteem can be harmed and their sense of security compromised. Therefore, it is suggested that "since trust is a moral good, persons should strive both to cultivate trusting relations and to be seen as trustworthy" (Wicks et al., 1999, p. 102). Trust is a moral endeavour as it involves personal judgments about individuals' intentions and behavior relative to normative expectations of how they should behave (Bryk & Schneider, 1996). Furthermore, at least four morally significant phenomena are linked with trust: communication of self-understanding to others, voluntary exposure of one's vulnerabilities to others, voluntary restrictions of self-interested behavior, and reciprocity that fosters autonomy which is "central to the institution of morality" (Brenkert, 1998, p. 311).

As Tschannen-Moran (2014b) noted, trust has paradoxically been viewed as both *glue* and *lubricant*. Marshall (2000) argued that trust is the glue that binds our relationships together—a natural law that governs human interaction. This pertains not only to societal, but also to organizational, relationships. Without trust things fall apart, whereas a strong bond and cohesive and cooperative relationships between leaders and followers promote productivity and accomplishment of goals in organizations (Baier, 1994; Tschannen-Moran, 2014b). Tschannen-Moran (2014b) continued that as a lubricant, trust greases the machinery of an organization by enabling communication and greater efficiency through confidence in people's words and deeds in the organization. On the other hand, she noted, a lack of trust generates heat and friction that bog down the work and wastes the energy of an organization. Thus, the dynamics of trust include both our trusting others and their trusting us—based on our trustworthiness.

### **Trustworthiness and Leadership**

Trust has been recognized as an important factor in leadership because it a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2013). The capacity to trust is critical to leadership: “leaders who are more trusting in others are more trusted by others in return. Leaders who have a high capacity for trust are willing to trust another person until they have clear evidence that he or she can't be trusted” (Reina & Reina, 1999, p. 16). Accordingly, trust is a reciprocal process: trust begets trust. Generally speaking, the more we give, the more we get. Martin (1998) asserted that “trust breeds collaboration and reciprocation. An atmosphere of trust is pervasive. Once established, people tend to collaborate more easily” (p. 44). People feel they can take a risk in an environment of trust by being more willing and able to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity, take calculated chances, and share pertinent information, including our inner thoughts and feelings, when appropriate.

Several scholars have attempted to categorize relational trust. In close relationships, Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) viewed trust as consisting of *predictability* that emphasizes the consistency and stability of a specific behaviors based on past experience; *dependability* that concentrates on the dispositional personal qualities which warrant confidence in the face of risk and potential hurt; and *faith* that centers on feelings of confidence in the relationship and the responsiveness and caring expected from the other in the face of an uncertain future. Within the organizational realm, Reina and Reina (2006) outlined three types of reciprocal or transactional trust. *Contractual trust* (trust of character) is based on managing expectations, establishing boundaries, delegating appropriately, encouraging mutually serving intentions, keeping agreements, and being congruent in our behavior.

Confidence in the intentions, consistency, and reliability of others to honor commitments makes or breaks trust in an organization. *Communication trust* (trust of disclosure) is the willingness to share information, tell the truth, admit mistakes, maintain confidentiality, give and receive constructive feedback, and speak with good purpose. This type of trust contributes to the development of safe and productive work environments, proportionately affecting the individual's trusting capacity and organization's performance capacity. *Competence trust* (trust of capability) involves respecting people's knowledge, skills and abilities, and judgment, involving others and seeking their input, and helping people learn skills. In other words, it means that acknowledging and respecting a person's competence to do what is needed in particular situations will build trust.

Trustworthiness is an invaluable asset to individuals and organizations alike (Cooper, 2004). It has been observed that in ongoing organizational relationships people expect to continue relating to the same network of people. When this is the case, there is incentive to behave in ways that are trustworthy, to develop a sustained reputation for trustworthiness, and to reap the mutual benefits of these trusting relationships (Tschannen-Moran, 1997). Govier (1998) noted that being trustworthy means being reliable out of a sense of concern and commitment, as well as being dependable. Trustworthiness is not merely an attitude, but the evaluative appraisal that an individual is worthy of trust (i.e., a person might reasonably place his or her trust in that individual) (Brenkert, 1998). The fact that a person or organization is trustworthy does not imply that others ought to trust them, since other organizations or people may have no reasons to form a relationship with them at all. Hence, trustworthiness relates both to the qualities of the person or organization to be trusted, as well as to those doing the trusting (Brenkert, 1998).

To be trustworthy, "school leaders must learn to create conditions in which trust can flourish within their school as well as between their school and their community" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014b, pp. 12–13). Leaders can establish trustworthiness through employing various *facets of trust* around which individuals base their trust judgments in relationships: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, competency, hope, and wisdom (Day, 2009; Norman, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2014b). Especially significant features for trustworthiness are honesty (truth-telling, respect for property); sincerity (as opposed to hypocrisy); promise-keeping; keeping confidences and other forms of loyalty; reliability (performing expected tasks, keeping appointments, promptness); dependability (disposition to do what is needed in a situation); competence (as pertinent to context role); and concern for others (being non-manipulative, protective, and having a capacity for empathy and sympathy) (Govier, 1998). Similarly, Sztompka (1999) helpfully outlined three bases or cues upon which trustworthiness can be determined: *reputation* (the record of

past deeds), *performance* (actual deeds, present conduct, currently obtained results), and *appearance* (physiognomy, body language, intonation, readiness to smile, hairdo, dress, ornamentations, jewelry). Appearance is superficial, external, culturally relative, and more easily manipulated than either performance or reputation. Furthermore, he concluded that it is riskier to base trust on the limited information provided by present behavior than to base it on the long-term reputation of the person to be trusted.

### ***Schools and the Need for Trust***

Due to the unique social capital-exchange role that schools play in our society, it is critical to understand the dynamics of trust relationships in schools. The pertinence of trust becomes clear when we see, as Baier (1986) did, that the notion of trust may be lived as the reliance on others' competence and their willingness to look after, rather than harm, what is entrusted to their care. Therefore, it may be asserted that trust is a fundamental concern for school organizations that are positioned to help students learn. However, Baier (1986) also described a paradox: "yet, because trust requires vulnerability to further good causes, it creates opportunities for those one trusts to injure what one cares about" (p. 236). What one cares about may be tangible things, such as one's possessions or money, or intangible (i.e., democracy or norms of respect and tolerance). Perhaps by default, "schools look after all of these for society and consequently, the issue of trust is critical to an understanding of how schools educate students. Indeed, the *in loco parentis* responsibility conferred on schools by...society requires trust" (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001, pp. 4-5).

Schools provide the context for trusting others and being trustworthy participants in learning communities. In the context of school organizations, trust is a generalized expectancy that the words, actions, and promises of an individual or group can be relied upon (Hoy & Kupersmith, 1985), as well as confidence, optimism, and belief in others in the absence of compelling reasons to disbelieve (Hoffman, Sabo, Bliss, & Hoy, 1994). As Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) noted, in a school setting, trust can be viewed and experienced in relation to a variety of reference groups—students, teachers, administrators, and the organization. Students must trust their teachers in order to learn; teachers must trust their students to assume responsibility for their own learning and relationships as they develop; school personnel must trust one another in order to cooperate toward accomplishing a common goal; and schools must be trusted by the communities that sponsor and fund them. The latter point is especially pivotal, as increasing public distrust in institutions and their leaders creates "a special challenge for schools because trust is so fundamental to their core mission" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014b, p. 13).



Trust is important for educational reforms that seek to transform ways in which schools are organized and managed. For example, trust is a critical factor for school improvement and effectiveness efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Lack of trust can become a serious impediment to many of the reforms taking shape in schools. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) rightfully emphasized that trust facilitates productivity at all levels of the organization, whereas its absence impedes progress. Tschannen-Moran (1997) identified several interconnected influences of pervasive distrust in a school culture: without trust, students' energy is diverted into self-protection and away from learning; without trust, proliferation of rules causes resentment and alienation among teachers and students; lack of trust leads to constrained and distorted communication and ineffective problem-solving; and finally, without trust school administrators' leadership efforts may not inspire staff to go beyond the minimum requirements of their jobs. Most recently, Tschannen-Moran (2014a) found that collective measures of principal, teacher, student, and parent trust significantly and positively related to one another and, most importantly, significantly and positively contributed to student achievement. Based on these findings, she concluded "that schools will find it nearly impossible to fulfill their essential mission unless they establish a climate of trust within and between the various role groups within the school" (p. 74).

We posit that it is crucial that school principals have a certain threshold of trust to lead effectively. There is a certain *trust quotient* that leaders must have with their constituents (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2014). Cosner (2009) found that cultivation of collegial trust was a central feature of the capacity-building roles of school principals. To cultivate trust, and to be regarded as a trustworthy school leader, one needs to foster a compelling collective vision, model desired and appropriate behaviors, coach faculty to align their skills with the school vision, manage organizational resources fairly and skillfully, and mediation of inevitable conflicts in schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2011). Furthermore, Tschannen-Moran (2009) argued that one of the pathways to trust-building is the adoption of a professional orientation to school leadership, and "with greater professionalism and greater trust, schools are likely to flourish" (p. 244). Therefore, trust cannot be taken for granted in schools, but rather must be conscientiously cultivated and sustained, first and foremost, by school leaders (Tschannen-Moran, 2014b).

## Research Methodology

In this article, we used a qualitative phenomenological analysis approach as we aimed to describe the common meaning for different individuals (school principals) of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012; Van Manen, 1997). Of course, the concept of "lived experience" has special methodological meaning for researchers, as it

encompasses participants' reflections and perceptions concerning the experiences that they have lived through and recognized as discrete types of experiences. The basic purpose of a phenomenological approach is to identify the unique individual experiences of the research participants with a phenomenon (trust in schools) and combine these into a composite description of the universal essence or the nature of their lived experiences. In other words, our use of this approach to analysis focused on the description of divergences and convergences of our participants' experiences of the phenomenon of trust in school relationships. We deemed this phenomenological approach to be appropriate for examination of the lived, concrete, and situated experiences of these participating Canadian school administrators, based on their perceptions, reflections, descriptions, and discussions regarding the phenomenon of trust in the relationships they mediated and observed in schools.

There are various ways to collect data with participants who have experienced the phenomenon. Most often, data collection in phenomenological studies consists of in-depth or multiple interviews with participants. However, other forms of data may also be collected, such as observations, journals, art, poetry, music, and other forms of art (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, Van Manen (1997) identified taped conversations; formally written responses, and accounts of vicarious experiences of drama, films, poetry, and novels as sources for analyses. Based on these perspectives, we considered formally written responses to open-ended survey questions to be appropriate forms of data for our phenomenological analysis (Frey, 2004; Van Manen, 1997). This phenomenological approach to our analysis of formally written responses allowed us to reduce the information to significant statements or quotations and to combine these statements into themes (Creswell, 2012). Based on the rich descriptive responses, we were able to develop not only a *textural description* of the experiences of the participants (i.e., what school administrators experienced), but also, insofar as possible, a *structural description* of their experiences (i.e., how they experienced the phenomenon of trust within their working conditions, situations, or context) (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, our discussion, implications, and conclusions offer a combination of the textual and structural descriptions to convey a sense of the overall essence of the lived experiences of the Canadian school administrations with respect to trust.

### **Study Participants**

Our sample included school principals ( $N = 177$ ) from all Canadian provinces/territories who completed a survey of school administrators' perspectives of moral agency and trust. The demographic section of the survey elicited data about participants' age, gender, province/territory, years of

**Table 1.** Demographics of Respondents ( $N = 177$ ).

Age range	%	Province	%
31–40 yrs	14	Alberta	20
41–50 yrs	37	Saskatchewan	23
51–60 yrs	42	Ontario	20
61 yrs or more	2	Others	37
<b>Gender</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Years of professional experience</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	53	10 years or less	3
Female	45	11–20 years	27
No response	2	21–30 years	52
		31 years or more	15
<b>Years of experience as a principal</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Formal ethics training</b>	<b>%</b>
5 years or less	31	Yes	53
6–10 years	35	No	25
11–15 years	14	Unsure	22
16 years or more	19		

professional experience, years of experience as a principal, and formal ethical training. In addition, extra open-ended space was provided for participants to elaborate on the type of ethical training in which they have been involved.

The participating school administrators fit into four different age range categories; the majority of them (79%) belonged to the 41–60 age group. Gender representation was almost equal, with the slight prevalence of male principals. While the majority of participants represented three provinces, Alberta (20%), Saskatchewan (23%), and Ontario (20%), all provinces/territories were represented in this study. More than half of the participants were experienced educators with extensive experiences in principalship and significant experiences with formal training in ethics. For the majority of participants, formal ethical training constituted university graduate and undergraduate courses in ethics, philosophy, or religious studies; professional development workshops or seminars in ethical and moral decision-making and counseling; or a combination of both (for details, see Table 1).

### Data Sources

The sole source for this exploratory study, the survey of Canadian school administrators' perspectives of moral agency and trust, consisted of closed- and open-ended questions and was developed by the researchers based on suggestions and recommendations from an expert panel of principals (for details, see Noonan et al., 2008), the relevant literature, and adapted items from related instruments (Center for Corporate Excellence, 2007; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The survey was field-tested with a group of nine principals prior to distribution by mail and online.

In line with the phenomenological focus, this article discusses *only* the select open-ended survey questions that pertained to the theme of fundamental importance of trust in the work of school principals. We asked the

respondents to provide us with their insights, stories, experiences, and advice with respect to the trust imperative through six open-ended questions: (1) *From your perspective, what role does trust play in your school?* (2) *Where and/or when does trust matter the most for you in your school work?* (3) *When you are making decisions for the school, how important a role does trust play?* (4) *When all is well with trust in your school, what is it like and how does it actually help?* (5) *In your experiences, how do you determine if you can trust someone?* (6) *From your perspective as a principal, what are the characteristics or features of a trustworthy staff member?* The survey also included related closed-ended items (some adapted from the sources mentioned), but data from those responses were not included in this analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Principals from across Canada were contacted using email and mail addresses from the Canadian Education on the Web (2007) resource. Hard copies of survey were sent to approximately 2,000 principals; invitations to participate in online surveys were sent to approximately 3,000 principals across Canada. The returned completed surveys ( $N = 177$ ) provided sufficient qualitative data for the needs of this exploratory study. At the same time, we believe a low response rate may have been indicative of school administrators' extremely busy professional lives, lack of personal contact between the researchers and participants, and ease of dismissal of online survey invitations.

### **Data Analysis**

Typically, phenomenological approaches aim not only at description, but also at the interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences; in this sense, researchers mediate between different meanings (Van Manen, 1997). Due to the methodological constraints of this research and as far as possible in our analysis, we attempted to go beyond superficial descriptions (*begreifen*) to look, rather, at the school leaders' internal understandings (*verstehen*) (Ladd, 1957) underlying the importance of trust in their work relationships. We followed the systematic procedures, moving from the "narrow units of analysis" (e.g., significant statements), and on to broader units (e.g., meaning units) (Creswell, 2012), with the purpose of interpreting *what* our participants had experienced and *how* they experienced the phenomenon of trust in their work relationships in schools (Moustakas, 1994).

Responses to the select open-ended questions provided rich descriptive data for the study. Participants' comments from paper-based and online surveys were compiled by the researchers and analyzed both deductively and inductively following standard coding processes for etic and emic

approaches to data analysis (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Six open-ended questions served as the initial organizing framework for the responses. In addition, the emergent codes were established according to the dominant themes recurring in the responses. Both etic and emic codes were then combined into categories, and categories into patterns or concepts (Lichtman, 2010). As a result of analysis, four thematic categories emerged, each containing several subthemes.

## Research Findings

The analysis of participating Canadian principals' perceptions regarding the fundamental imperative of trust in school settings produced the following four thematic categories: *importance of trusting relationships*; *importance of trust in decision-making*; *trustworthiness and interpersonal aspects of trust*, and *utility of trust*. Each of these categories included several sub-themes that were organized in the order of strength of expression and frequency of mention indicated by the respondents. Emergent themes from qualitative data analysis are presented below with related quotations from the respondents. With the inadequacy of quantification of the principals' collective voices for this exploratory study, we use such descriptors as few, some, most, many, majority, etc. to indicate the frequency of mention assigned to each sub-theme by the participants.

### ***Importance of Trusting Relationships***

In this thematic category, participants' responses yielded such sub-themes as centrality of trust in relationships, degree of importance of trust, reciprocity of trust, confidentiality and trust, and cultivating trust in others.

### ***Centrality of Trust in Relationships***

Given the view in the literature that trusting relationships are claimed to be fundamentally important in the workplace, we were interested in the viewpoint of principals regarding the extent to which trusting relationships are important between principals and key stakeholders in schools. The common belief among the responding principals was that trust was integral to building the foundation for relationships between students, staff, parents, and the principal. As one of the participants powerfully noted, "Education and learning is all about relationship and a central pillar of relationship is trust." Another principal remarked, "I have to have staff who trust in me. Also I have to be able to trust my staff." When asked to describe the role that trust plays in their schools, most principals used descriptors like "huge," "extremely important," "enormous," "integral," "vital," "critical," "pivotal," "significant," "major," and "key." Thus, for the participants trust was

imperative in the relational aspects of working with others—students, staff, parents, senior administration, colleagues, and the community. As one principal commented, “Without trust between students and students, teachers and students, teachers and parents, teachers and teachers, plus administration, the school could not exist.”

A more detailed analysis of responses allowed us to tease out a number of relational categories that ascertain the importance of trusting relationships between the principal and teachers, principal and office administration, principal and parents, principal and students, principal and community, principal and school board, principal and school based professionals, and principal and support staff. While the findings were not surprising, the principals’ responses confirm the nonempirical assertions of the literature.

### ***Degree of Importance***

The degree of importance of trusting relationships assigned by the participants to various relational categories seemed dependent upon the frequency of interaction between the principal and a specific group of stakeholders. Most of the participants saw trusting relationships between the principal and teachers as the most important ones. As one participant noted, “trust matters most in relationships with staff and colleagues; trust is still important (but less so, in dealing with parents and students); although mistrust can destroy relationships and poison work done with students and families.” Another participant viewed trusting relationships between administration and teaching staff as a means for cultivating trust among other stakeholders in the school:

The most important part of the trust I give is to my teaching staff. This is a mutual trust. I trust that they will perform their duties to the best of their abilities and that they will interact with their students in a calm, fair and reasonable manner, that the working environment they help create is conducive to students and staff accomplishing their goals. In return, they trust that I have their “backs.” In this sense, they trust that I will prevent them from unfair criticisms by students, parents, colleagues, or supervisors. They also trust that my decisions are guided by my belief in “best practice” for schools. Supervision and discipline of students and staff should be firm, fair and prompt. They trust that they will be supported in creating that climate which is conducive to them faithfully fulfilling their duties, and conducive to all students learning.

On the other hand, many respondents indicated that the infrequent and more distant (less direct) relationship between school board and principals had a lesser degree of importance.

### ***Reciprocity of Trust***

The majority of respondents highlighted the importance of *mutual or two-way trust* in relationships with others. One of the principals noted this as a reason for why trust was important for him: “We respond to people’s request based

on the assumption of mutual trust. I try very hard to always respond in a way to build trust and hope that sets the expectation for others to also respond that way.” Another participant highlighted the importance of hearing each other, and described how trust can help people to “truly listen to each other. New ideas are entertained. Praise and compliments abound. There is laughter and genuine concern for each other.” In addition, the elements of *servant leadership* were often mentioned in relation to the significant role that trust plays in the life of a leader. “As the leader, I need to build two-way trust between myself and those I serve. If trust begins to erode, on either side, the whole process will unravel,” noted one of the respondents.

### **Confidentiality and Trust**

Not surprisingly, reciprocal trust was perceived to be the most critical in issues that required confidentiality. For example, this was evident in situations that involved intercollegial conversations with the use of confidential or critical information, confidential discussions with “superiors” around the work performance of staff members, and in cases where privileged student or parent information needed to be shared only with specific staff members. One principal highlighted the importance of confidentiality “in dealing with sensitive issues” and linked it with the impact that respecting confidentiality has on “building solid relationships.” Another administrator described the desirability of trust in being able to “leave information on your desk and [have] no one tamper with it or share the information.”

### **Cultivating Trust in Others**

A significant portion of the data emphasized the importance of personal connection in trustful relationships as a means to cultivate trust in others. Trust within relationship building was often linked with respect, collaboration, and ultimately “carrying over to decision-making.” Many principals’ described their efforts to build trust in their relationships with all stakeholders. Although the most common stakeholders mentioned were staff members, cultivating trust with students, parents, school board administrators and the broader school communities were also seen as important. Principals argued that devoting time to establish trusting relationships with teachers needed to be an important item on a principal’s agenda. The advantages of cultivating trust with staff were seen as “staff know where they stand with procedures and feel empowered when making decisions. They participate fully in discussions and professional conversations.” Cultivating trust with students was seen as a positive way for “resolution of conflicts,” and the “open door concept” and approachability were deemed to work as means to encourage parents to “feel they can more readily communicate a concern.”

## ***The Importance of Trust in Decision Making***

In this thematic category, the following sub-themes were gleaned from the data analysis: imparting and obtaining trust in decision making; making unpopular decisions for the greater good; and authenticity in decision making.

### ***Imparting and Obtaining Trust in Decision Making***

Many of the respondents described the importance of granting trust to others and relying on trust from others in everyday decision-making processes. Some principals described how this could often be a trusting judgment call on their part: “Can you trust students to take notes home to parents; can you trust staff to complete tasks as required?” and “You end up working with the hope that you can have trust in reactions, people and results.” Often principals had to make judgments about how much information to share with others as part of the decision-making process. For example, one principal said, “it is really important to know who I can trust with what, in terms of with whom and what sensitive information I share with others.” One administrator described the importance of staff realizing that “at times, not all information can be shared; my staff needs to trust in me [and] support the decisions I make [even if] they may not have all the information.” Overall, respondents recognized that it was important for all stakeholders to trust in the principals’ decision making. “My community needs to trust that I am making decisions that have the needs of the students at the center, and my staff needs to trust that I will balance their needs as well. I consult before making decisions, but I hope that my staff trusts my judgment in the end,” noted one of the participants. A critical role in this process was assigned to the perceived level of accountability attributed to their decision making by various stakeholders. As one principal noted, it was not an easy undertaking: “I am accountable for all decisions made as principal and I have to work hard to be trusted, that I am [seen as] fair and supportive of students and families. I have to work on building trust with families in need in order to help students, and this is hard and time-consuming.”

### ***Making Decisions for the Greater Good***

The data showed the importance of trust within decision making, which was strongly linked to the respondents’ perception of the necessity to make decisions for the collective well-being. One principal posited that decision making “goes beyond my immediate and personal trust in individual staff members to the staff trusting that my decisions or the ones we make collectively are for the greater good of all, and that they will be supported regardless of personal views.” Another noted that “some decisions are very much dependent on the staff or community trusting me to look after the



interests of the school.” Several principals shared about their awareness of being trusted by stakeholders to make decisions that were in the overall interests of the school, even when those decisions might be unpopular. As one administrator described “I feel/believe that they need to know my decisions are based on what’s best for the kids. It’s not for/against their view, it’s for the students.” Yet, another principal added that effective schools administrators are those who are able to make a decision on information from many sources and not just the popular vote. To that point, participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of using the principle of the “best interest of children and their learning” as the ultimate factor for their decision making.

They also felt supported by their faith in the goodness of others and in others’ abilities to make good decisions in the best interest of children. Participants emphasized their desires to make informed and right decisions; as one principal described, “I usually feel confident when I make the decision because I usually research all aspects of the concern.” For the majority, the most important indicator of rightness was the consistency with which they made good ethical decisions. As one respondent noted, the test of a correct decision sometimes was “if I can wake up the next day and know that I’d make the same decision again, then it’s all good.” While wrestling with the complexity of making informed decisions in a timely fashion, principals tried to adhere to their own moral compasses, to the values of the school, and to the professional codes of ethics, all the while ensuring that they did no further harm while acting in the best interests of the students and others in the learning community.

### ***Authenticity in Decision Making***

A number of participants’ emphasized the importance of trust being evident through authenticity and truthfulness in decision making. Many school administrators explained that they tried to ensure that any information used to support their decision making came from “trustful and reliable sources.” Principals linked their decision making with authenticity, the types of information they used, the realm within which decisions were made, and the desire to be trusted “to make good decisions” and to uphold “ethical, personal core values” in decision making. One principal explained, “Great care must be taken to ensure that participation in decision making is authentic. Failing to follow through on a staff decision kills trust.” Other responses captured the challenges of establishing and maintaining trust within the larger community while ensuring authentic communication. For instance, one respondent noted a desire to “talk freely and not tell untruths (i.e., tell people that they are doing a good job when they are not). This also means that you have to tell people the truth when they have areas to improve. I tend to look to myself first when things go wrong.”

## ***Trustworthiness or Interpersonal Aspects of Trust***

Within this thematic category, participants' responses were organized into such sub-themes as the temporality of trust-building; the trusting school culture; body language and intuition; and honesty and reliability.

### ***Temporality of Trust Building***

Many respondents pointed to the historical nature of trustworthiness, established through reputation and built up over time. A number of school administrators linked trustworthiness to the dynamic level of trust in interpersonal interactions and pointed to its capability to shift over time. One of the participants commented:

I have a basic level of trust in all human beings that they can be counted on to do the right thing. So with strangers that level of trust exist[s]. With people that I know, I either have that same level of trust or more, or our relationship over time has shown that the other person cannot be trusted to always do the right thing and therefore is not to be trusted.

Several other principals reported that in learning whether to trust someone, they watched for “what they do and how they entrust with others,” emphasizing that “time will tell if [a person] can trust someone.”

Historical relationships with others were connected to character and endorsement, with some respondents highlighting the importance of the history with the person, recommendations, and credentials as key factors that informed whether they could trust someone. One principal commented that trust based upon reputation “grows over time and through experience with the individual.” Other comments from participants were that “past performance” and “past experiences” were important, that a “certain degree of trust with monitoring is usual,” and that it was easier to establish trusting relationships if a “referral came from a trusted source.” To this point, several school administrators shared the following comments:

- levels of interactions which you have with a person and the results of those interactions will determine the level of trust you place in a person;
- past examples of someone doing what they say they would do is an indicator that they should be trustworthy;
- your experience with the person guides you to place more or less trust in them over time. Trust is embedded in relationships, which takes time to build.

These and other comments pointed to the perspective that to reach a deep level of trust, relationships need to be nurtured over time.

### ***Trusting School Culture***

For many of the respondents, trustworthiness was dependent upon a trustful environment. As one principal posited, “[to administer] school matters in an atmosphere that is distrustful would be ineffective and unsustainable. If conditions are always trustful, communication and problem solving would be more effective.” The imperative of trust’s presence in school relationships was emphasized by principals’ beliefs that breakdown of trust results in the environments of distrust and undermined professionalism. In their comments, principals acknowledged that at times “it was easier to trust some students, staff, and parents than others.” These were seen as direct outcomes of breakdown in trusting relationships and negative experiences with misuse of trust by others to achieve their own purposes. Therefore, it was important to principals that the environment in their schools is one where “all stakeholders feel safe, valued, and heard.”

Principals believed that they were trusted to establish an open and caring type of atmosphere in which “staff, parents’ and students’ concerns would be looked after and people would feel cared for.” Creating a culture of trust was seen as essential to provide a secure environment where “teachers and students are able to take risks and express their deepest held opinions and convictions.” To that end, they had to deal with divisions and frictions along the lines of “us” and “them,” be it between parents and parents, teachers and parents, teachers and teachers, students and teachers, students and students, or students and parents.” A culture of trust was seen to be conducive to establishing a “climate/culture of consistency,” where “there is an air of confidence” and “student and staff issues are low.” One principal talked about the importance of having open doors in communication, where “people are talking. People feel free to ask questions and disagree if they feel they must, people are positive, people don’t make assumptions about what you really mean.” Trust and openness in communication were helpful in creating an environment where students in particular “are not afraid to speak up and/or seek help when needed from all staff.”

### ***Body Language and Intuition***

Several respondents discussed the importance of body language in helping them to identify people who they felt could not be trusted. Many of the principals had learned to be observant of physical signals that might indicate mistrustful behaviour. In particular, eye contact, mannerisms, opinions, and presentation of oneself were all important indicators, as one principal explained:

I know I can trust someone by the non-verbal clues I pick up from them. I have always been a pretty good judge of character and have been able to tell who is trustworthy. Often past experiences with that person will help me make decisions.

Another principal described the importance of observing body language alongside the type of language being used, revealing how they had considered “how many times a story changes and how many times you have been lied to before.”

Where trustworthiness had not yet been established, respondents reported that it was sometimes built on faith. A few principals described how “after some discussion, [trustworthiness] becomes a “gut” feeling,” and recalled using “gut instinct,” or “intuition.” One principal suggested that “it is not a matter of ‘knowing’ so much as intuiting” and often one needs to “take a leap of faith.”

### ***Honesty and Reliability***

Respondents overwhelmingly reported “honesty” as the most important character trait for fostering trustworthiness. Other essential character traits were described as being respectful, dependable, ethical, and reliable. For many respondents, integrity and loyalty were seen as desirable traits, as were kindness and a caring attitude. Character traits were clearly valued where they appeared to be genuine and consistent, with one principal highlighting how trustworthiness was “a person’s way of being, . . . or the way they conduct themselves.”

Reliability and predictability were seen as essential traits of trustworthiness. In order to achieve trustworthiness, principals argued, staff have to be counted upon to: “do what they say they are going to do,” “be true to their word,” and “carry through with commitments.” A person “that follows through on commitments, who respects confidentiality, who does the hard thing over the easy thing, if the hard thing is warranted” was held up as a model of trustworthiness. For most respondents, the ability to adhere to one’s own belief system, to have “actions and words match,” to be “able to stand by her/his convictions in the face of adversity,” and to be able to “walk the talk,” were seen as intrinsic to trustworthiness. As noted by one of the participants, trustworthy colleagues “know and follow established policies, act for the good of all staff and students, and are good judges of what is right.”

### ***Utility of Trust***

This thematic category included such sub-themes as the usefulness of trust for team building and the strengthening of staff morale; aiding communication; supporting teaching and learning; implementing change; and managing incidents, discipline, and conflict.

### ***Team Building and Staff Morale***

Trust was seen as helpful in ensuring that no egos or confounding influences are getting in the way when “students, staff, and the community are all working towards a common goal.” Respondents noted that all is well with trust when “there is a sense of pulling together to accomplish

a job,” and “people are more collaborative and often share in curriculum dialogue.” Trust was seen as the “pivotal component of a strongly built community.” Noting the utility of trust, one principal stated that trust was a vital component for a leader “to have leverage with staff and students.” Another principal added, “Without it you cannot build a team.” Trust and team cohesiveness within the school community were also linked with developing good morale within the school team. It was evident that principals felt that trust cultivated high staff morale which, in turn, promoted a productive work environment.

### ***Aiding Communication***

Respondents explained that trust was an enabler of communication, providing an atmosphere where one could carry out one’s duties with a greater sense of confidence. Principals highlighted that “teachers and staff feel comfortable talking with administration and confident that their issues are private” and that “students know they can speak with a responsible adult regarding issues they may be having and may be more inclined to share problems and difficulties.” Trust was also seen as an important facilitator for the “free exchange of ideas with all staff, parents, and students, even when there is disagreement.” One administrator even imputed the benefit of having “no irate phone calls from parents” to the trustful relationships with students’ families.

### ***Supporting Teaching and Learning***

Many of the respondents identified the integral role of trust in supporting teaching and learning within their schools. Principals recognized that trust has the ability to create “a great place to work where teaching and learning is a priority” and where “teachers are able to put their best teaching practices in motion and work on reaching the different abilities of students within their classes.” Principals felt that trust was essential if all of the staff in school were to have a positive effect on students. One respondent outlined the need “to be able to trust that the people standing in front of those students are doing all they can to bring about learning in a safe and stimulating environment.” Another respondent emphasized the need to ensure students’ parents know that principals “will do everything possible to provide the best for their children.”

### ***Implementing Change***

A few principals recognized the utility of trust in situations when they were trying to implement change in their school organizations. They described the role of trust as being “huge,” noting that it is “tough to move people who don’t trust [leader’s] ability or intentions. In the absence of trust there is not a lot of movement forward.” Trust was identified as being “the key to

initiating any type of change” and vitally important “when [the principal asks] the staff to do something new or try a new approach.” Trust was also seen to be pivotal “when working with change and transitions” required by various mandates, policies, and restructuring in organizations.

### ***Managing Incidents, Discipline, and Conflict***

Some principals highlighted the usefulness of trust when either they or their staff members were called upon to deal with discipline issues. Trust mattered in instances of “reporting incidents to local agencies, dealing with discipline in a fair manner, and in communication with parents and community about issues.” One principal felt that where trust was present between administration, teachers, and students, “students were not in conflict with each other or with the teachers or administration.” Trust was also seen to be essential in critical matters regarding the safety of the students and when occasions required confidentiality.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study revealed multiple dimensions of the importance of the trust phenomenon in the work of the Canadian school principals, pointing to the *personal*, the *relational*, the *decisional*, the *educational*, the *organizational*, and the *moral* imperatives of trust for school leaders. We deem these categories to be heuristic, as they emerged from our data as interrelated, interdependent, and without clear boundaries; yet, we think they are helpful in our understanding of principals’ lived experiences of trust.

Within the *personal imperative*, the literature on trust posits that trust is a biological and psychological requirement for well-being and a foundation for both self-respect and positive interpersonal regard (Baier, 1994; Marshall, 2000). In our study, principals not only affirmed the importance of trust in a personal sense, but spoke to the positive requirement of trust to develop genuine and consistent character traits required for establishing personal trustworthiness, such as integrity, kindness, care, honesty, reliability, loyalty, respect, and commitment. Interwoven throughout the themes and often implicit was also the principals’ sense of personal competence, expressed through their own and others’ confidence in their capacity to accomplish the required task or make the right decision. These personal aspects were seen as the sources of trustworthiness—those aspects of trustee’s (the trust referent) behaviors and attitudes that make the trustor (a trusting party) judge the trustee’s worthiness of trust (Van Maele, Forsyth, & Van Houtte, 2014a). Moreover, our study reinforced the findings that leaders’ trustworthiness is established through caring atmosphere and attitudes. Benevolence and care have been widely regarded in the literature as imperative features of leaders’ trustworthiness (Baier, 1986; Noddings, 2005; Tschannen-Moran, 2014b). As

has often been said, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Effective leaders are those who "act spontaneously with a true heart of compassion, caring for the person regardless of the consequences" (Cooper, 2004, p. 134). Our study results ascertained the findings about such facets of trust as benevolence, reliability, competence, openness, and honesty (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999) and emphasized the need for personal authenticity and truthfulness, especially in relational matters and in complex leadership decision-making. Therefore, personal imperative of trust serves as grounds for trustworthiness of authentic (Begley, 2006) and influential leaders (Smith & Flores, 2014). Our findings confirm the claims of Reina and Reina (2006, p. 9) that at the core of trust building lies "increasing our awareness of ourselves and our behaviours with others." Through our heightened awareness, they posited, leaders are in a stronger position to choose to practice behaviours that build trust, and by practicing these behaviours consistently, leaders earn their trustworthiness.

The *relational* imperative of principals encompassed the reciprocity of trust with people in multiple relational categories. Relational trust in schools is reciprocal in the sense that trust of one party in another helps create a built-in incentive for the latter to reciprocate trust with trustworthiness (Coleman, 1990). As middle managers, principals simultaneously manage at least four sets of trusting relationships: upward with their superiors, downward with subordinates, laterally with other principals, and externally with parents and other community and business groups (Goldring, 1993). It was the frequency of interaction between the principal and a specific group of stakeholders that affected the degree of importance of trusting relationships, assigned by the participants to various relational categories. Our study results pointed out that the imperative of reciprocal trust was deemed especially pertinent in the most frequent principal-teacher relational category; the degree of importance seemed to decrease proportionately to the frequency of interaction. Similarly, Gimbel (2003) found that principals believed that an underlying dimension of the meaning of trust in schools was in the one-to-one interpersonal relationships they were sustaining with their teaching staffs based on reliability, consistency, and follow-through. Principals in our study regarded trust to be embedded in relationships, which take time to build through reputation based on past performance, mutual experiences, and endorsement or referral from others. Like Leveille (2006), we also found that principals believed that developing trusting relationships takes not only time but also transparency (openness) and accountability.

In principals' responses we further observed evidence of various levels of relational trust (Rempel et al., 1985), namely low level (predictability), medium trust (dependability), and highest developmental stage of trust (faith); the latter, deeper level of trust, required conscious attention and nurturing over time. Instrumental for cultivation of trust were personal connections

established with various groups of stakeholders. In relationships, personal connection is vital for the development of trust because people do not place trust in such intangible items as a title or a position, but afford their trust to leaders who build relationships through communication, by keeping their word, and by trusting employees first (Martin, 1998). Furthermore, despite the fact that trust-related issues sometimes occur in relationships between principals, staff, parents, and students, as evident from our study, they seem to be necessary for principals to elicit followers' input and create stronger and more productive cooperative relationships.

For the *decisional* imperative, principals shared that their everyday decisions were highly dependent on the level of trust afforded to school administration by others and their own trusting judgment calls about trustworthiness of others. Participants, whenever deemed appropriate, empowered teachers' decision making by consulting or entrusting confidential information with teachers. Korsgaard, Schweiger, and Sapienza (1995) also found that leaders' strong consideration of members' input and continuous interaction with them can enhance the fairness of decision making, increase the commitment to the decision, build attachment to the team, and promote greater trust in the leader. Valuing followers' input, thus, was deemed instrumental in building a team and developing collegial trusting relationships. As Martin (1998) argued, leaders send followers a powerful signal when they delegate responsibilities and refrain from interfering. In so doing, they bestow trust upon their followers, who, in turn, reciprocate by bestowing trust on the leader. Trust becomes a "liberating process" (p. 45); by sharing control over decision making, leaders free their followers. Ultimately, however, the brunt of the decision-making responsibility fell on their shoulders, as they described being accountable to school community stakeholders for making often unpopular, yet authentic, decisions for the collective well-being and in the best interests of children. Authentic leaders who care and honestly challenge decisions are followed by others even through the tough course of ups and downs (Cooper, 2004).

We observed instances of principals assigning importance in decision making to all three types of transactional or reciprocal trust (Reina & Reina, 2006). Contractual trust in decisions made by our participants were based on mutual understandings and collaboration with staff, and were further based on common expectations, intentions, and role responsibilities, as well as on trust in students to do what they say they would do. Communication trust encompassed sharing of sensitive information with teachers and trusting that it would be kept confidential, telling the truth with honesty and openness, and communicating decisions with good purpose. Interestingly enough, nonverbal aspects of communication and intuition were also deemed important in establishing communication trust. And finally, competence trust in decision making manifested in principals'



seeking input from teachers and nurturing their confidence and competence by trusting them to complete tasks as required.

The *educational* imperative of trust was seen in its integral role in supporting teaching and learning within schools. Principals recognized that trust has the ability to create a safe school environment where best teaching practices and professional learning, as well as student learning and achievement, were a priority. With others, we found that principals consider trust to be foundational for school effectiveness and improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth, 2008; Louis, 2007; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011). Trust was vital to relationships from which there would be delegation of power through shared decision making and obtaining trust from teachers by safeguarding their professional competence. The improvement of the educative functions of a school was thought to be best established and sustained through the fostering of professional climates, conducive to teachers faithfully fulfilling their duties and conducive to all students learning. School leaders need to foster “warranted hope” in schools (Walker & Atkinson, 2010), a hope that is grounded in such leadership behaviors as diligence and mindful practice, sense making and adaptive confidence. Resonating with other research (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Bryk & Schneider, 1996; Tarter, Sabo, & Hoy, 1995; Tschannen-Moran, 2009, 2014a; Wrigley, 2003), we have seen that trusting environments are perceived as allowing for affirmation, empowerment, hope, and engagement of teachers in their work to establish well-functioning professional learning communities; enhanced teacher learning; and positive educational outcomes and student learning.

The *organizational* imperative of trust was vividly seen in our principals’ perspectives and reflections on their lived experiences. Without trust between and among students, parents, teachers, and administration, the school simply could not exist. Although this seems to be the most basic level of understanding of trust in schools, principals’ comments indicated that trust was seen as instrumental for maintaining cohesiveness within the school community and developing good morale within the school team. Trusting relationships and personal connections established between the leader and the followers may result in a collaboration and reciprocation through shared commitment to the organizational vision (Martin, 1998). Participants in our study believed that effective collaboration in school required trust, as did establishing a collaborative climate and a culture of consistency. For these principals, the levels of trust in relationships among all stakeholders in the educational process determined a great deal of their professional effectiveness, as well as the overall school effectiveness. Based on Cosner’s (2009) claim that collegial trust enhances capacity-building of school principals, this point resonates with Tschannen-Moran’s (2009) argument about the need to adopt a professional orientation to school leadership as one of the pathways to trust-building, which in turn will lead to improved professionalism,

stronger commitment, greater cooperation, increased task engagement, and demonstration of greater expertise. Our participants made references to the significance of trust in practices and behaviors of servant leadership, which has been discussed in leadership literature as having potential to improve organizational performance (Joseph & Winston, 2005).

These principals were cognizant of the potential high costs of distrustful environments in school organizations. Distrust increases the costs of work because people must engage in self-protective actions and continually make provisions for the possibility that other persons will manipulate the situation for their own advantage (Limerick & Cunnington, 1993). Distrust for participating school administrators resulted from a breakdown in trusting relationships and past negative experiences with misuse of trust by others to achieve their own purposes. Govier (1992) argued that distrust tends to provoke feelings of anxiety and insecurity, causing people to feel ill at ease and expend energy on monitoring the behavior and possible motives of others. Distrust, like trust, is a function of culture, understood and expressed in different ways, due to interrelated factors such as history, conflicts, belief systems and ideologies, patterns of interaction, and institutional structures (Samier, 2013). From our findings, we suggest that creating an organizational culture of trust was seen to be an essential means by which to establish a safe and professional working environment. These findings provide warrant to the argument that trust cannot solely be built through interpersonal means alone, but also requires institutional mechanisms (structure, policies, contexts, etc.) that not only complement interpersonal efforts but also provide the basis for developing a lasting culture of trust (Mishra & Mishra, 2013).

The *moral* imperative was another underlying dimension of the principals' trust-brokering function in schools. Our findings revealed that principals were often acting as moral agents in their school organizations, responsible for choosing a certain course of action from alternatives. In many instances, by using their moral compasses, relying on shared school values, and operating within professional codes of ethics, principals (agents) in our study acted on behalf of teachers and students in their schools, as well as parents and families. Individual comments pointed to the fact that the protection of teachers from unfair criticism, use of the best teaching and learning practices, and promotion of collective well-being and the best interests of the students were often the drivers behind their agentic practices and behavior. Moral agency is usually defined as a person's ability to make moral judgments based on some commonly held notion of right and wrong and to be held accountable for these actions (Angus, 2003). Moral agency is characterized by consistent ethical living, the development of one's moral character, the cost of following the principles of ethics, and the care one has for others (Hester & Killian, 2011). As leaders, principals were faced with making decisions that tested their integrity and trust quotient with their constituents. Having an

awareness of their personal trustworthiness, a moral platform to stand on, and to standing up to difficult issues was seen as an important feature of moral agency for these principals in their efforts to establish and maintain trust between and amongst the various partners in education. As noted elsewhere (Kohn, 1997; Paul-Doscher & Normore, 2008), moral grounds on which leaders can rely help with the establishment of trust among stakeholders. A key to a leader's trustworthiness was seen in the possession of a firm sense that other people matter, a basic moral conviction that their needs and interests count from a moral point of view and must be significant in our lives (Govier, 1998). We found that in school settings, trust was seen as both a means and measure of manifested moral agency, and therefore, it is important to recognize the central role of a principal as a trust broker for themselves and others in a school organization.

### Concluding Remarks

Through this article we have seen the importance of the trust phenomenon to our participating principals in various aspects of their work. Their lived, concrete, and situated experiences confirmed our understanding of trust as a construct that reflects the hunger, need, and efforts to create and sustain socio-emotional capital between people. Trust helps people to better perform everyday activities, to meaningfully engage with others, and to securely carry people in and through times of vulnerability and risk-taking. Although this study only allowed us to get a glimpse into establishing and cultivating trust as imperative activities for school leaders, we may confidently posit that the cognizance of trust dynamics is essential for a successful principalship.

The findings of this study have made it possible to conclude that trust was an extremely important part of these principals' work. Trust enhanced personal trustworthiness and helped create, foster, and sustain relationships between and among various stakeholders in schools. Both the trust granted to school administrators by others and principals' personal judgments about the trustworthiness of others were instrumental in everyday decision-making in schools. Overwhelmingly, these principals also noted that trusting relationships between all who are involved in the schooling process were highly important not only for a school organization to function properly, but also to promote safe, caring, and productive learning and working environments. And, finally, we have seen that much of the work of principals calls those who hold such positions to broker trust as they assume their roles of moral agents with an overriding moral and educative purpose.

The implications of this exploratory research are found in its offering descriptions of trust brokering role of school administrators and providing greater understanding of the nature of principals' moral agency in building

trustworthy relationships and making trustworthy decisions that are in the best interests of children and other stakeholders. The need to further examine the realities of school principals' trust building and sustaining continues to be an important part of research because of its implications for school leader development. The imperative of trust being present in school relationships raises two basic questions: how can this valuable social capital be created and sustained, and what are the vulnerabilities and fragilities associated with trust in schools? To take up the latter question and given the imperative of trust, we ask: to what extent does broken trust result in the environments of distrust and mistrust, undermined professionalism, and, consequently, school ineffectiveness? The test of our claim that trust is imperative for school principals is in the observation of what happens if a principal arrives at school without it. . .

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