

# Educators' Notebook

## Reviews of Research of Interest to Educators

### **Trust as the Foundation of a Professional Learning Community**

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This paper outlines a review of the literature that details the significance of relational trust, as defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002), on the development of a school's professional learning community. Relational trust, among the staff and between the staff and principal, is vital for developing the normative cultures required for schools to become professional learning communities.

February 2009

Volume Number 20, Number 1

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# Trust as the foundation of a professional learning community

## Introduction

It has been suggested that relational trust is the strongest facilitating factor for developing schools as professional learning communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Relational trust is seen as the non-negotiable social condition that acts as a foundation for the kinds of mature adult relationships necessary in professional learning communities.

Principals play pivotal roles in establishing and nurturing professional learning communities (Bryk, Camburn & Louis, 1999; Hord, 2004; Sparks, 2005; Toole & Louis, 2002). Bryk et al. (1999) suggest that principals are critical in creating a normative order or culture that reinforces the practices of professional learning communities. Hord (2004) argues that transforming a school organization into a professional learning community can be done only with the sanction of the principal and the active nurturing of the entire staff's development as community. As Sparks (2005) states, "Leaders matter in the creation and long-term maintenance of professional learning communities. The quality of teaching, learning, and relationships in professional learning communities depend on the quality of leadership provided by principals and teachers" (pp. 156-157).

In addition to the important role that principals play, Hargreaves (2007) suggests that trust is the "backbone" of a strong and sustaining professional learning community characterized by:

strong cultures of trusted colleagues who value each other personally and professionally, who are committed to their students, who are willing to discuss and disagree about evidence

and data that can inform them about how to improve their practices in ways that benefit their students – and who are willing to challenge one another's practice in doing so. (p. 188)

Trust provides the foundation for dealing with sensitive issues or topics that otherwise would be left unattended, regardless of their importance. At its core, then, trust is interpersonal; it exists in some state between two people. Within a group, interpersonal connections become multifold, complex, and interdependent. The aggregate status of "organizational trust," in turn, strongly influences the cohesiveness and effectiveness of any institution (Groenewegen, 2006).

## Relationship Between Trust, School Improvement and Professional Learning Communities

A sizeable body of research (Barth, 1990, 2006; Fullan, 1999; Hargreaves, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998) focuses on the importance that trusting relationships among staff, and between staff and the principal, have on school improvement efforts, and how this aligns with the literature on professional learning communities. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) assert that trust among faculty may well be the foundation of school effectiveness, which coincides with Barth's (1990, 2006) sentiment that the adult relationships that occur in schools are the *sine qua non* of school improvement. As Tschannen-Moran (2004, pp. 107-108) states,

Professional learning communities are based on trust that teachers and principals will act with the best interests of students in mind by

researching best practices and pursuing data to bolster decision making (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996; Goldring & Rallis, 1993; Louis et al., 1996).

Fullan (1999) claims that in order to improve student outcomes school-wide, success will only be possible “if organizational members develop trust and compassion for each other” (p. 37). Not only is trust necessary to build professional learning communities, but a lack of trust impedes all movement towards its development.

### **Relational Trust**

Bryk and Schneider (2002) propose the notion of relational trust, anchored in the social exchanges attached to key role relationships between staff members in schools. For relational trust to grow and be reinforced, however, both principal and teachers must observe the behaviour of the other as being consistent with mutually held expectations. Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue that relational trust is an organizational property of schools because “its constitutive elements are socially defined in the reciprocal exchanges among participants in a school community, and its presence (or absence) has important consequences for the functioning of the school” (p. 22).

Relational trust is foundational to the functioning of school systems because these systems are premised on the belief that parents can trust that teachers are adequately accomplishing their responsibilities in classrooms, and that principals are completing leadership responsibilities that facilitate learning in their children (Kochanek, 2005). Similarly, relational trust is vital within schools because, “Teachers assume that their colleagues are acting appropriately behind classroom doors”

(Kochanek, p.3).

### **Relational Trust and Professional Learning Communities**

Relational trust, as conceptualized by Bryk and Schneider (2002), may be the strongest facilitating factor for developing schools as professional learning communities. Relational trust is seen as the non-negotiable social condition that acts as a foundation for the kinds of mature adult relationships necessary in professional learning communities. Trust acts as the glue to which collaboration, reflective dialogue, and de-privatization of practice can adhere (Spillane & Louis, 2002). It is critical for the authentic individual and organizational collaboration necessary to support learning in a professional community.

### **Conclusion**

Principal leadership is a crucial element in the development of relational trust within schools. Trust in the principal is determined primarily by the behaviour of the principal. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) argue, “the principal controls his or her own destiny by ways that engender trust or distrust” (p. 348).

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

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ISSN 1181 - 9480

This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture a full body of research, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.