Teachers' Perceptions of Relational Trust, Leadership, and Culture

In a New England Middle School

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Abstract

Trust in schools has emerged as a foundational component and an extensively studied phenomenon, particularly as it relates to school improvement efforts. Research findings have suggested that collaboration and the establishment of relational trust among and between teachers and school leaders can contribute to improved school culture, teacher efficacy, and student achievement (Nias et al., 1989; Rosenholtz, 1989; Schliefer et al., 2017; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). In this qualitative, phenomenological research study, seven content area teachers in a New England middle school participated in semi-structured interviews focusing on perceptions of leadership dynamics, attitudes, voice, efficacy, and trust in their school. In the 25 years since this school opened, there have been 10 building leaders. Participants' work experience in the organization ranged from 10 to 25 years. Findings suggested that leadership changes and practices have contributed to a disjointed culture characterized by isolation, lack of voice, and distrust. Initiative fatigue, a confining school schedule, and perceived lack of support from leaders were identified as key components negatively affecting culture. Positive themes included teachers' resilience, hope, and dedication to their students. The research focused on one school. Findings may inform expanded inquiry in this school and related studies in other organizations. Additionally, findings of this study, in combination with findings from concurrent studies and activities in the organization, may contribute to efforts by leaders to improve relational trust, culture, community, and teacher voice.

Keywords: relational trust, culture, resilience, voice, leadership

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Section One: Introduction to Research

Background

Leadership in schools, from traditional top-down approaches to more collaborative practices, has been a focus of educational research for the past several decades, particularly as it relates to major school reform efforts (Hargreaves, 1996; Slater, 2004; Woods, 2005). Models reflecting contributions by stakeholders from multiple organizational levels have been hailed as more equitable and inclusive alternatives to *command and control* leadership practices common in many public schools (Hargreaves, 1996; Slater, 2004; Woods, 2005). Traditionally, decision-making has been considered the exclusive duty of leadership, where *leadership* is defined by, and delegated to, those in administrative positions. As a result of this dynamic, many teachers have been charged with working under guidelines, plans, and curricula to which they have had little or no input. Findings from research, and reviews of reform efforts, have suggested that elevating the voices of teachers can give them a more meaningful role and more investment in their school's climate and instructional practices (Versland & Erickson, 2017). Among themes which have emerged from the research, the importance of trust, and the building and sustaining of trusting relationships, have been found to support these efforts (Demarco, 2018; Karadag et al., 2014; Leis et al., 2014; Praszkier & Nowak, 2012; Versland & Erickson, 2017).

Fundamentally, trust and positive relationships lie at the core of successful workplace cultures (Cameron, 2013). Leanna and Rousseau (2000) used the term *relational wealth* to describe stability and optimal productivity in organizations. Relational wealth refers to the resources created or realized within an organization through the internal relations among employees, having most to do with how well employees work together as a team. Establishing

and sustaining relational wealth are important for building positivity in organizations and for supporting its higher purpose (Cameron, 2013; Leanna and Rousseau, 2000). Prioritizing the establishment of relational wealth and trust is crucial for the successful functioning of a school organization and for realizing productive, meaningful reform efforts (Slater, 2004).

Relational trust has emerged as a critical component in forging leadership practices which are collaborative, supported by teachers, and which promote student success (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Leis et al. (2014) describe relational trust as organizational trust within schools, created via social exchanges between members of one group and another. Bryk & Schneider (2003) characterize relational trust in school settings as "the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students" (p. 45). Professional relational trust has been tied to increased self-efficacy and group efficacy, and improved student achievement and engagement (Demarco, 2018; Karadag et al., 2014; Versland & Erickson, 2017).

The cultivation of relational trust within an organization can rely on multiple strategies supported by sound theoretical foundations. Structural-functional theories (Praszkier & Nowak, 2012) can be a reference for initiating such efforts. The notion behind structural-functional theories is that modifying an organization's structure to reflect contributions, working relations, and the best intentions of all, can only be effectively realized after core relational functions are established (Praszkier & Nowak, 2012). An initial functional phase focuses on cultivating relationships to foster trust and promote collaboration from the ground up. Time and stakeholders' sense of worth also have been identified as important components for building relational trust (Hargreaves, 1994; Slater, 2004). When "only superficial insights and fleeting

attention" (Chalmers, 2021, p. 1367) are offered to solve a problem, and when the approach comes from administration, we cannot expect to realize substantive progress and change, or assume that a *good* solution is inevitable (Hargreaves, 1994).

Statement of Inquiry

The opportunity of practice informing this research study relates to teachers' perceptions of relational trust and school leadership within a New England middle school. This study examined teachers' perceptions of their school administrators' style and manner of leadership, as they impact relational trust and the culture within the organization. In addition to contributing to the body of scholarship addressing leadership styles and relational trust in schools, this study has the potential to bring current, pertinent perspectives of effective leadership to light within the specified setting. At the request of the school principal and curriculum coordinator, learning area leaders (LALs) conducted an informal survey early in the 2021-2022 academic year to seek feedback from their constituents regarding work-related concerns. Most respondents identified lack of voice, initiative fatigue, and low staff morale as areas of concern.

Purpose of Study

This study examined perceived leadership styles and organizational relational trust in a middle school in New England. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used—one which employed semi-structured, open-ended interviews, supplemented by observational data and review of communication within the organization. The qualitative approach identifies variables that emerge from interviews with the participants in this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative approach allows for interview questions to be adapted as the study progresses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This research is important because, as noted, relational trust in schools has been tied to increased self-efficacy and group efficacy. Trusting relationships in schools have been found to influence engagement and achievement of students (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Understanding the systems in place which may promote or deter relational trust is important for developing focused, context-specific change initiatives within this organization.

Research Questions

What are teachers' perceptions of leadership dynamics within the school?

How do leadership approaches and practices impact the attitudes, voice, and perceived efficacy of teachers?

How do leadership approaches and practices impact perceived trust between teachers and leaders?

Design of Study

Setting

The setting for this study was a public regional middle school in New England. Students feed into the middle school from six elementary schools. The school historically has served a population of between 1,200 and 1,300 students, grades six through eight. The current enrollment at the middle school is about 960 students. The recent reduction in numbers is largely a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and some families' decisions to opt for homeschooling, online learning, or alternative schools. Approximately 200 people work in the school, including 48 content area teachers. As a member of the school's staff for 25 years, the investigator brings

knowledge of the organizational structure and connections with staff, students, and administrators to support the development of inquiry.

Participants

Participants for the study were seven teachers in the school, each of whom work within the core content areas and professional learning communities (PLCs) of math, social studies, science, and English. Participants were recruited for equal representation of grade level taught and gender identity. Three teachers identify as female, and four teachers identify as male. Participants were required to have at least 10 years of teaching experience in the organization's setting. Adhering to these criteria allowed for the sharing of historically developed perspectives informed by experiential perceptions of current and past leaders. Participants' experience in the school ranged from 10 to 25 years. The school has been open for 25 years. Selecting participants from each grade level allowed for the sharing perceptions specific to those experiences. Participation in the study was voluntary and confidential. For reporting of data and findings, each of the seven participants was assigned a letter denoting length of employment in the organization, where A represented the longest time served and G the shortest time served. Informed consent was obtained from each participant (Appendix C).

Participants' grade levels and years of experience are detailed in Table 1. It should be noted that several participants have had experience in multiple grade levels. Of the seven teachers who participated in the study, four have had experience at the grade six level, five have had experience at the grade seven level, and three have had experience at the grade eight level.

Table 1

Participants' Grade Level Taught, Content Area Taught, and Years of Experience.

Content Area Taught, Years of Experience

Grade Level Taught	Science	Math	English/Language Arts	Social Studies	Totals
6	25	18	18		61
7	2	7	4	15	28
8	9		7	16	32
Totals	36	25	29	31	121

The focus of the inquiry was on participants' perceptions of leadership practices and their impact on relational trust, voice, and efficacy. Purposive sampling, as opposed to convenience and theoretical sampling, was important to use in this study for gathering accurate, context-driven information (Shah & Al-Bargi, 2013). "From the perspective of qualitative methodology, participants who meet or exceed a specific criterion or criteria possess intimate (or, at the very least, greater) knowledge of the phenomenon of interest by virtue of their experience, making them information-rich cases" (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 539).

The positions of the investigator and participants within the context of the setting were incorporated in the qualitative approach. The influence of "personal, cultural and historical experiences" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8) on participants emerged during data collection. The meaning generated through the inductive process revealed patterns and themes, which supported assertions made at the conclusion of the study.

Procedures

Qualitative research approaches, while common in anthropology and sociology for many decades, were not used widely for social sciences and educational settings until the 1960s (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Qualitative methodology encompasses various approaches and identifying characteristics. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) noted that participant observation and in-depth interviewing stand out as practices which most commonly support qualitative research. For the purposes of this study, a constructivist/interpretivist qualitative methodology was employed. Within this approach, the investigator and participants bring meaning and understanding to situational phenomena specific to the setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Epistemologically, the relationship shared between the investigator and participants in the study is crucial (Okesina, 2020). Subjective and transactional epistemologies depend directly on interactions and relationships between the investigator and participants for the understanding of phenomena and generation of knowledge (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Qualitative methodological approaches "focu[s] on the full complexity of human sense-making" (Okesina, 2020, p. 62) as situations develop.

The constructivist or interpretive paradigm, which acknowledges context, relationships, and the experiential realities of subjects in deriving meaning, is well suited to educational research. "Interpretive methodology seeks an understanding of phenomena from [the] individual's perspective, investigating interaction among individuals as well as the historical and cultural contexts which people inhabit" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). The qualitative and phenomenological approach to research within this paradigm respects the experiences of the subjects and the social influences at play. All participants in this study share a similar work

environment and some common knowledge of its situational characteristics. This contextual

congruity within the qualitative approach, along with the investigator's professional connections

with the participants, may have allowed them to feel more comfortable expressing views and

bringing their own meaning to the process of the inquiry.

One major benefit inherent in the qualitative approach is that it allows malleability in

inquiry and reporting, where the meaning of the data relies on the interpretations of the

investigator and the participants. An important feature of the inductive process is the iterative

practice of reviewing and reformulating questions, as needed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The

practice of using a "tentative interview protocol" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 197), as opposed to

a rigid one, allows for flexibility and change as the interviews progress. This flexibility is a

hallmark of qualitative research. "[The] interviews involve unstructured and generally open-

ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the

participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187). This departure from a "one-size-fits-all"

(Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 198) approach to data collection allows for the investigator to adjust

with the evidence as it is presented, to best address the research questions. The focus via the

interview process on personal experiences and points of view of participants also legitimizes the

participants' thoughts and ideas. Challenges of this approach lie in the open-ended nature of the

design, the subjectivity of the data, and the potential influence of researchers' views on the

outcomes.

Data Collection Tools

Qualitative data collection tools followed procedural guidelines outlined by Creswell &

Creswell (2018). The investigator conducted a single semi-structured, face-to-face interview with

each participant, inclusive of descriptive notes about behaviors and perceived points of interest and emphasis. Interviews took place before or after the school day, or during a planning period, determined at the discretion of each participant, and in a location convenient for each participant. The interview protocol included basic information, an introduction, an opening question, content questions or sub-questions, probes, and closing instructions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interview questions (Appendix A) addressed culture, climate, availability, communication, support of administrators, and relational trust between teachers and administrators within the organization. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, using *Transcribe* software (Transcribe/4.16.0.375), during the month of December, 2022. Each interview lasted from 35 to 39 minutes. Handwritten analytic memos supplemented the transcribed text (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldana, 2021).

Observational data and pertinent communications within the organization supplemented data from interviews. These included notes from staff and team meetings, school communications, feedback from consultants, and information from the investigator's conversations with teachers and administrators. These aspects of data collection are described in more detail in the Data Analysis section.

Data Analysis

Data analysis procedures followed sequences outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and adapted from Saldana (2021) and Tesch (1990). Raw data were organized and examined before they were In Vivo coded for descriptive data and themes. Descriptive and thematic data were examined and interpreted for meaning and for assertions which emerged (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative data analysis included the transcription, organization and hand-

coding of interview data (Saldana, 2021). In this coding stage, data were examined for words, phrases, trends and patterns which emerged. This was in line with the nature of the inquiry, in that it "prioritize[d] and honor[ed] the participant's voice" (Saldana, 2021, p. 365).

Four interconnected approaches were employed to organize and analyze the data. Tesch's Eight Steps (1990) guided the initial coding, particularly the early steps, during which transcripts first were carefully read, and then two individual transcripts, from participants A and G, were revisited to get a sense of the meaning of the content (Tesch, 1990). Second, all transcripts were reread and In Vivo coded. Codes were examined for their alignment with research questions and assigned to categories corresponding to individual questions, or combinations of questions. Third, representative In Vivo codes were organized in an outline (Saldana, 2021) for the purpose of representing perceptions of the organization over time. Finally, codes were examined again and organized according to Creswell and Creswell's categories of "Expected codes, Surprising codes, and Codes of unusual or of conceptual interest" (2018, p. 195).

Analytic memos added descriptive and interpretive information (Saldana, 2021). Saldana (2021) notes that coding is considered by many to be a linear, progressive process of refinement, but he interprets the process as cyclical, "reverberative in nature" (Saldana, 2021, p. 88), and he credits Finfgeld-Connett for the observation that "codes and categories organically expand and contract during the data analytic process" (Finfgeld-Connett, 2018, p. 35-36). This study's use of "thick, rich . . . [and] detailed descriptions" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200), in combination with other data, helped to bring more realistic and tangible perspectives to the findings.

In conjunction with interview data, other sources of data were examined to triangulate the findings. Formal and informal organizational communications were considered, along with

meeting agendas, activities and outcomes, and narrative data. Additional data were generated by work being done with consultants from The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). This organization was brought in to work with school staff to identify areas of concern and paths for improvement. The work included the completion of three surveys: one for staff, one for students, and one for families. The surveys and dissemination of findings combine with an AMLE sponsored book: *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), which serves as a guide for the work of AMLE. This book was provided to each staff member as required reading, with time given for all to complete. The LALs hosted four voluntary weekly book group gatherings for staff to read and discuss points of the book, as they related to improvement efforts within the school. Data from these meetings, along with results of the staff survey, provided a more comprehensive view of the process.

Assumptions and Delimitations

Basic assumptions include the investigator's belief that participants would be interested in cooperating and that they would be willing to share experiential information and opinions about the study's focus. As a dissertation in practice, a fundamental delimiting factor is that data, results and findings cannot be generalized—they are specific to this study.

Another delimiting factor relates to the investigator's worldviews and how these views may have impacted the study. Constructivist and interpretivist worldviews informed the focus of the research, in that the inductive approach relied on individual views of the participants, and the meaning they brought to their lived experiences within the workplace (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Assumptions identified by Crotty (1998) in the constructivist approach are important to recognize here. Participants' experiences, inclusive of their social interactions, informed their

perspectives and responses to the interview questions. The generation of meaning from collected data underscores this reliance on social interactions within a work community's setting, and the inductive process which drives it.

Looking for assumptions is a reflective process and a critical aspect of research (Brookfield, 1995). In reflecting where we are in relation to the world, assumptions help frame thinking around practice and areas of research, and they encourage viewing reality from multiple perspectives. Paradigmatic, causal and prescriptive assumptions (Brookfield, 1995, 2012) bear mentioning in the context of the proposed study.

Paradigmatic assumptions relate to how one views and experiences the world around them (Brookfield, 2017). One paradigmatic assumption from the investigator's experience within this setting is that the leadership style and structure have been static for an extended period of time. The historically cyclical structure of the school year, including the enduring factory-modeled schedule of the school day, defines another paradigmatic assumption. This was upturned by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which a transition to remote learning experiences required that daily and weekly school day schedules be adapted and adjusted frequently, not only to accommodate scheduling considerations, but also to be in compliance with local, regional and national guidelines. The concepts of *school year* and *school day* may look much different from those with which we are familiar in the future. These points are not central to the considerations of this study, but they may have affected participants' perspectives and narratives.

Causal assumptions have to do with how things in the world work and what impact someone or something may have on these processes (Brookfield, 2017). Causal assumptions about the workplace and teacher roles may have been impacted by the pandemic. For example, a

familiar assumption of teachers is their belief that they are reaching all students effectively, by virtue of their preparation and engagement with them (Brookfield, 1995); yet even in the absence of a pandemic it is nearly impossible to confirm that this happens as intended. "One of the hardest things teachers learn is that the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the purity of their practice" (Brookfield, 1995, p.1). Students come into the learning environment with different needs and expectations, ones which may not be addressed by instruction, leading at times to discrepancies which may prove detrimental, despite teachers' best intentions. The COVID-19 pandemic may have further contributed to teachers' inability to reach all students effectively.

Prescriptive assumptions are defined as what one thinks should be happening in a given situation (Brookfield, 2017). Prescriptive assumptions and biases brought to this study by the investigator are that teachers' views should be recognized, valued, and included in decision-making, and that leaders should consider this in planning and implementing initiatives. A majority of teachers in the setting reported having little voice in the decision-making process, as indicated by the LAL survey results.

Delimitations for the study were inherent in its design and scope, given the focus and the context. The participants were teachers from a specific middle school who represented the traditional core content areas of social studies, science, math, and English. The participants—their views, and the meaning they brought to their experiences—were limited by the study's structure and setting, and the professional relationships specific to this setting. Thus, the results from this study cannot be generalized or applied to other settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

As a dissertation in practice, one intended outcome is for the results and conclusions to inform improvement plans within the setting. The possibility does exist, however, for components and outcomes of this study to inform future research, whether it be in this setting or other settings. For example, it seems reasonable that elements of the framework and purpose of this study may be used for future research in elementary and high schools, in other middle schools or in alternative school settings. Aspects of the study's focus also may be incorporated for studies with participants representing different demographics, such as students, parents, and support staff. Moreover, results generated from this study, while specific to the setting and participants, may be compared to findings from similar studies, to identify trends and themes the studies have, or do not have, in common. To this end, this study may be viewed as a launching point for further focused research in this area, which will contribute to the growing body of literature and inquiry addressing these concerns.

Another delimiting factor may be tied to the contextual characteristics framing this, or any, study. For instance, Simon et al. (1986) coined the term *satisfice* to describe investigators' rationality in sticking with the familiar, rather than looking for more optimal methodology options, when approaching research. Vogt (2008) pointed to the "qual-quan distinction dilemma" (p. 2), noting that qualitative and quantitative methods and designs are not mutually exclusive, that neither purely causal nor purely descriptive research is sufficient to provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon, which in the end may influence the effectiveness of the outcomes in practice. An additional consideration is the assertion by Creswell & Creswell (2018), related to that of Vogt (2008), that quantitative and qualitative methods reside at two ends of a continuum rather than as distinct, rigid entities.

Definition of Key Terms

Attitude: A feeling or opinion about something or someone, or a way of behaving that is caused by this (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Authenticity: The quality of being real or true (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Collective Efficacy: A group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment (Bandura, 1977, p. 471).

Initiative Fatigue: "When the number of initiatives increases while time, resources, and emotional energy are constant, then each new initiative—no matter how well conceived or well intentioned—will receive fewer minutes, dollars, and ounces of emotional energy than its predecessors" (Reeves, 2010, p. 27).

Learning Area Leaders (LALs): Members of the faculty who represent their specific content area or department.

Morale: The spirit a group has that makes them want to succeed . . . a sense of well-being that comes from confidence, usefulness, and purpose (vocabulary.com, n.d.).

Relational Trust: Organizational trust within schools created via social exchanges between members of one group and another (Leis et al., 2014); "the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students" (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 45).

Relational Wealth: Resources created within an organization to promote internal relations among employees, for the purpose of promoting stability and optimal productivity (Leanna & Rousseau, 2000).

Resilience: "The self-righting and transcending capacity within all youth, adults, organizations, and communities to spring back, rebound, and successfully adapt in the face of trauma, adversity, and/or everyday stress" (Truebridge, 2014, pp. 12-13).

School Climate: The attitude of an organization; the collective mood, or morale, of a group of people (Gruenert, 2008); "The immediate feeling one gets in [a school] environment" (Truebridge, 2014, p. xxi).

School Culture: The personality of an organization, based on values and beliefs (Gruenert, 2008); "Beliefs, attitudes, dispositions, values, and traditions, which develop over time" (Truebridge, 2014, p. xxi).

Trust: "One's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p.19-20); "the lubricant that enables a leader to bring about transformative change" (Browning 2014, p. 407).

Significance of the Inquiry

The inquiry arose from enduring concerns regarding a dearth of teacher voice and the historical tendency of leaders to determine the focus and scope of many of the initiatives which directly affect instructional staff, students, and their families. Many initiatives launched within the study's setting have been focused on end goals rather than on how the organization achieves them. This deficit-based, problem-solving approach "[has] an unfortunate propensity to reinforce hierarchy [and] erode community" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999, p. 19). The approach also touches upon elements of Scharmer's (2018) notion of mindless action, where leaders can be prone to implement abstract ideas without knowing enough about them or seeing any real learning happen.

Specific to this study's setting, findings may contribute to the development of a plan to examine and address issues around climate, instructional practice, collaboration, relational trust, and student success—all of which may be measured and evaluated as they contribute to and are reflected in opportunities for growth. During the 2021-2022 school year, senior leaders hired external consultants to begin this process. Consultants from two organizations have been present in the school since 2022 to meet with stakeholders—including students, teachers, staff, and administrators—to identify factors contributing to current concerns. The consultants have been retained for the 2022-2023 school year. As noted earlier, the organization is also working in concert with consultants from AMLE, who are assisting with the interpretation of survey data from teachers, students, and parents, and using resources from the publication, *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Findings from this Dissertation in Practice hold the potential to supplement and contribute directly to the development of new and adapted practices which emerge from the work of the consultants.

Summary of the Inquiry

The qualitative approach to the research within the constructivist or interpretive paradigm respects the contextualized experiences and social interactions of the subjects and how they derive meaning from them. Generalizability is a limitation of this study given that the participants are all working in one school setting, but the findings may inform meaningful progress and change within the organization. The iterative approach of the qualitative study design, where participants' responses and meaning can drive the direction of the inquiry (Mack et al., 2005), is important for the setting and practices the research may inform.

Section Two: Practitioner Setting for the Study

Introduction

The setting for this study is a regional New England middle school which serves six communities, all with their own elementary schools. Collaboration and transparency have been annual district-wide goals emphasized by senior leaders as philosophical and operational necessities. Actual collaboration in practice has been a source of discussion and concern among teachers. Historically, many of the initiatives developed and introduced, and the decisions and directives which have framed and guided them, have originated with senior leadership, with limited contributions from teachers. The middle school's culture is reflective of this dynamic, where years of top-down initiatives and decision-making by leadership have contributed to a confining work environment for teachers. Staff have absorbed frequent building leadership changes and they have been enlisted to work under conditions created without their input. The influences of building leaders on practices and the day-to-day functioning of the school have contributed to this challenging environment.

Results from the 2021-2022 LAL survey mentioned earlier, and conversations among teachers during team and PLC meetings, have identified concerns around lack of trust, an oppressive work environment, and overall low morale. The work in progress to date, guided by the consulting teams, has been encouraging. Many teachers have reported feeling more supported and heard by building administrators. Administrators have been more visible in the building, more actively involved in instructional activities, and more responsive in addressing challenging student behaviors. Last year, the school's interim principal hosted a series of voluntary meetings with staff, referred to as *Fireside Chats*, intended as a forum for staff to safely voice concerns

and raise questions. The meetings, which happened approximately once per month, grew in popularity as more participants attended over the year. In addition to opening a door for teacher voice, the chats allowed for school leaders to reflect on concerns and ideas raised. Continued progress will rely on the willingness of all to embrace change with patience, humility, and optimism. Change efforts in schools rarely are immediately impactful; meaningful and lasting change can take years to establish (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

History of the Organization

During the 25 years since the middle school opened in 1997, there have been 10 building leaders, including four interim principals. Prior to this, in its former setting, the school was led for more than 20 years by the same principal and assistant principal. The current principal, formerly the principal in the district's largest elementary school, began work on July 1, 2022. Durations of terms for the five most recent building principals have been one year (interim), five years, four years, a quarter of a year (interim) and seven-and-three-quarters years. The school has experienced turnover in other administrative positions as well. Eight directors of special education and four assistant directors of special education have been in place over the last 25 years. The director of student services position, created 10 years ago to oversee school counselors, was held by three different administrators before the position was eliminated at the end of the last academic year. Until a retirement at the end of last year, tenures of two assistant principals had been stable for 20 years. A third assistant principal, a former teacher in the building, has been in this position for 10 years. In addition to the building principal, administrators new to the building this year include an assistant principal, an assistant director of special education, and a curriculum coordinator. The turnover and attrition rates of building

principals in recent years, along with the frequency of new initiatives, has had a debilitating effect on stability, where many staff members have reported perceiving the school as being constantly in transition. Notwithstanding these underlying concerns, the middle school and other schools in the district have enjoyed positive reputations among community members for quality, ample resources, and well-trained, experienced staff.

The consultants brought in to work with staff and leaders have been available on a monthly basis. Two consultants from one agency spend one week per month on site working with teams, PLCs, individual staff members, and leaders at the building and district levels. An additional consultant is working with the school's principal, curriculum coordinator, and LALs, meeting with them as a group once per month, and individually as needed. The AMLE group of consultants have a broader reach, inclusive of staff, students, and parents. Their level of involvement with staff has increased over the past couple of months, including dissemination and interpretation of survey results, and offering recommendations for next steps. The consultants have been open and responsive to the staff. Many have been encouraged by the consultants' availability when in the building, and their willingness to listen and offer ideas.

Despite the efforts of consultants to promote positivity and progress in the organization, many staff members wonder if the ongoing work is just another top-down initiative. In some cases, particularly during smaller team and PLC meetings, oversight by senior leaders and building administrators has deterred some staff members from openly sharing their views. Psychological safety has been a concern during the investigator's tenure in the school. Along with attrition rates of principals, this has had a diminishing impact on stability and on consistency of communication and programming.

Additional activities aimed at improving climate and culture in the school are in process. In recognition of a need for improvement, and supported by the work of consultants, leaders in the school have been actively engaged in encouraging positivity and relational wealth. The LAL team last year coined a mantra for the current school year. *Moving Forward, Looking Up* has been emblazoned on t-shirts which all staff received and were encouraged to wear on the first day of school. The opening meeting for school staff included various team building activities, including an initial *PIES* sharing activity, during which all were invited to share where how they were feeling physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. The meeting culminated in a cooperative activity where staff members shared key words reflective of growth and progress. The words were written on small pieces of ribbon and attached to a kite, which is displayed in the main foyer of the building. PIES sharing now frequently drives the check-in stage of team and committee meetings. Cooperative activities continue to drive some of the full staff meetings this year as leaders have attempted to establish a new baseline of community and respect. Many of their communications and activities have focused on listening and on moving forward collectively, with positivity and appreciation.

Beyond this, efforts have been made by the school's culture and climate and sunshine committees to promote informal, positive social interaction among staff members. Staff breakfasts occur approximately once per month. After-school bowling gatherings, a holiday party, and a newly announced table tennis club for staff, all reflect efforts by these committees to encourage improved morale and connections. During the 2022-2023 school year, for the first time since the COVID-19 outbreak, the annual staff soup day resumed. On this day, just before the winter break, most staff members bring in a crockpot of their favorite soups, snacks, or

desserts to share, and space is made in the building for all to enjoy a meal and conversation together. This activity has been a favorite of staff for many years, garnering an abundance of support and positive feedback.

Organizational Analysis

Within the setting for this study, a bureaucratic top-down management approach has sustained itself within the scaffolding of routines, procedures, goals, personalities, and traditions for decades. Senior leaders, whose bond with and control over building leaders have embraced aspects of an authoritarian leadership approach (Bush, 2007), have supported this bureaucratic model. Leaders have crafted initiatives and have touted them as collaborative and reflective of transformative, democratic leadership dynamics. In many cases, however, initiatives have been perceived by teachers as ill-conceived and misguided. Teachers have expressed frustration at the sudden, surprising rollouts of initiatives, which usually take place during staff meetings, with little or no advance notice or consultation.

Another area of criticism has been in the lack of fidelity in implementation of initiatives, where a detailed plan before the launch, and allowance for time in execution, have not been consistently offered. Some initiatives, even those which seem well planned and thoughtfully implemented, cease to continue after a period of time. An example of this was the development of a multi-level instructional team which included students and teachers from grades seven and eight. The team was designed for the purpose of focusing on core competencies and project-based learning, and as a possible prototype for the rest of the school to adopt. The initiative was launched and supported initially with professional development activities and ample PLC time

for teachers to plan. After a year—with no explanation to students, teachers, or community members—the plan was abandoned abruptly.

Practices such as those mentioned above have contributed to teachers' expression of *initiative fatigue* (Reeves, 2010). Although building leaders continue to encourage staff to reach out to them with concerns, questions, and feedback, many teachers have withdrawn from offering opinions and ideas, and from asking difficult questions related to instruction, time, and follow-through. Some who have approached leaders with concerns have reported being rebutted or treated with indifference. Others expressed feeling their concerns had been suppressed. A belief among many veteran teachers in the building has been that leaders often operate unilaterally and in isolation.

Bolman and Deal's (2017) four organizational frames provide a lens through which to view leadership in this organization. Through the structural frame, leadership presents as a rational organization, where roles and hierarchy are strictly defined and followed. Theirs is a primarily modernist perspective, focused on control, rationality, and efficiency. The approach to management is organized, supported, and sustained by rules, standardized procedures, and practices (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). The deeply embedded routines which have evolved out of this structure often characterize the operations of the district as a whole, and in turn those of its individual schools. This dynamic has had the effect of impeding, obstructing, and driving out substantive innovation and potential improvement, so that the familiar may be preserved. The rigidity of the model has precluded ample opportunities or allowances for flexible, forward thinking (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Many of the routines evoke elements of the symbolic frame (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Activities and rituals have undergirded an almost mythical representation of the organization,

reminiscent of the machine metaphor discussed by Morgan (2006), in which the parts are neatly

assembled and much of the *forward* movement of the district is momentum, operating "in a

routinized, efficient, reliable and predictable way" (Morgan, 2006, p. 13). As with this metaphor

and its scientific management approach, goals often serve as visible guideposts for progress but

without sufficient action. This perspective can inhibit opportunities for innovation, as it does not

allow for fluidity to adapt to changing circumstances. The school's image and positive reputation

in the community often supersede the critical examination and development of the parts and

processes. "The power of ritual becomes palpable if one experiences the emptiness of losing it"

(Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 251). Ritual and routines have limited some opportunities to move

forward.

From the perspective of Bolman and Deal's (2017) human resource frame, the

organization portrays itself as an extended family or community in which relationships have

been harnessed and cultivated to convey a friendly, welcoming, supportive learning and work

environment. This portrayal promotes stability and positive image. Image and reputation often

supersede expressions of humility by leaders. Greenberg (2005) describes humility as "a virtue

foundational to most other virtues" (p. 133). It "entails the appreciation of knowledge and worth

beyond the self" (Owens et al., 2012, p. 261). Humility is realistic—the opposite of narcissism

and arrogance (Tangney, 2000).

With respect to the political frame, as Bolman and Deal (2017) point out, politics in

organizations is inevitable—politics contributes to all of the frames. Power and pressure define

the relational aspects of the political frame within many organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Strategies for avoiding or suppressing conflict can become ends in themselves, relegating

resolution and improvement to become secondary concerns. Conflicts, compromise, bargaining,

and coercion all have had roles (Bolman & Deal, 2017) in this organization over the years.

Having a power structure to adhere to has allowed leaders at times to make decisions unilaterally

and hastily, without sufficient consideration for the effects they may have at varying levels. This

approach can prove harmful to the community of teachers, as it affects their ability to do their

jobs and to provide a stable, productive learning environment for students.

 "A vision without a strategy remains an illusion" (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 204). Often

in this setting, goal setting and initiatives, even when intentions seem genuine, are not perceived

to adequately address the needs of the staff and their ability to benefit students. The frustration

this can cause among the ranks of educators is palpable, and the relationships needed for

negotiation, support, and progress risk being threatened and compromised. Authenticity, morality

and ethical decision-making also have been tangible concerns. "Managers who get a reputation

for being manipulative, self-interested, or untrustworthy have a hard time building the networks

and coalitions they need for long-term success" (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 213).

 The organization's reliance on symbolic frames of organization permeates the other

frames, intermingling with them and in many cases driving them. In this sense, the organization

is theater, where assumptions are driven by rituals and myths, and where rationality is

downplayed in favor of culture (Bolman & Deal, 2017). These conditions can enable a *bounded*

rationality, in which the processing capacity of the organization's *brain* is made finite (Simon,

1955). Cognitive economizing cuts complexity and disorder to a manageable size for leaders.

Cognitive biases allow new information to be filtered, molded, and manipulated to suit the needs and beliefs of leaders (Benson, 2016). Leaders can use these cognitive shortcuts to jump to conclusions in an effort to hastily make sense of what is happening. As a result, challenging situations may not be addressed appropriately, and strategies for improving these situations are more of a band-aid—if not misguided altogether. Investing the time to reflect and look more specifically at what really is going on in challenging situations leads to developing informed diagnoses and better, more fulfilling strategies for addressing them (Bolman and Deal, 2017).

Whereas the organization's leadership historically has embodied a modernistic theoretical approach, the investigator's view is grounded more in symbolic-interpretivism, where meaning is socially constructed and context-driven specific to situations and experiences of those involved. Epistemologically, interpretivism, while relative to the knower (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006), extends to others who are working under the same administration; as individuals within a group they are constructing realities whose meanings overlap and are promoted within their context of the organization. During the 25 years of the investigator's tenure in the organization, many decisions and plans have been borne out of the context of closed-door meetings restricted to the leadership team. Flexibility and openness to outside input, while invited and suggested, rarely have led to any substantive follow-through related to current concerns and conditions. Again, the ongoing work of the consultants with school leaders, teachers, students, and families, encourages hope for change.

Leadership Analysis

As mentioned, the investigator's own epistemological beliefs may not be in line with those of past leaders. The organization's leadership has seemed "constructed and reconstructed

by their members through symbolically mediated interaction" (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006, p. 14). This would suggest symbolic-interpretivism, but in this environment, *membership* has been strictly defined, almost always limited to the school's leadership team. The realities which are constructed, and the interpretations promoted, have been limited to the experiences and ideas of a select few. The output, or product, from administration clings to a modernist perspective, embracing a structure of control, rationality, and efficiency, defined by rules and standard practices (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). More emphasis on planning, research, and analysis may promote the postmodernist practice of encouraging examination of multiple interpretations and inclusive forms of organizations and organizational theory (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006).

Historically, leaders in the organization have been driven by managerial, political and transactional models focused on "managing existing activities successfully rather than visioning a better future for the school. This approach . . . prioritizes the efficient implementation of external imperatives, notably those prescribed by higher levels within the bureaucratic hierarchy" (Bush, 2007, p. 395). The political model engenders conflict among stakeholders, while transactional model promotes a this-for-that culture (Bush, 2007). These three models— managerial, political, and transactional—often emerge from default plans and schedules which are more convenient for adults yet can adversely affect students. When social systems are in transition, the equilibrium of the system may be disrupted (Praszkier & Nowak, 2012). This disruption may lead to an organizations' reversion to previous states which are more manageable, familiar, and rational. Praszkier & Nowak (2012) refer to these previous states as *attractors*, noting that making solid, lasting progress may warrant defining a new, positive attractor.

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

Choosing viable research approaches in school settings demands that the research honors and respects a school's culture and is supported by leadership. Ravitch and Carl (2019) addressed this and noted some of the important mindsets leaders can demonstrate to maximize the effectiveness of applied research in their schools: "1) situating themselves as learners, 2) reconsidering data and research, 3) viewing collaboration as integral to professional excellence and development, and 4) challenging the status quo" (p. 14). Their focus on collaboration and the use of applied research to effect transformative change in a school proves a valuable anchor for embarking on school-based studies. Ravitch and Carl (2019) added that any school-based research endeavor relies on the willingness of both researchers and leaders to cooperate.

The analyses of the organization and its leadership are based upon the investigator's experiences as a teacher and counselor in the setting for 25 years. The investigator's broad view, reach, and social capital within the proposed study's setting all support an ability to conduct meaningful research. It is encouraging to be involved in efforts to identify issues and work toward a more collaborative, trusting, and psychologically safe environment for all. This impetus for change, should it gain traction and move forward, represents a great opportunity for positive and productive growth. In light of these efforts, the research proposed for this study may be instrumental in informing the process.

Summary of Practitioner Setting

Post-modern and participative leadership models (Bush, 2007) influence the investigator's work and research focus. "The post-modern model suggests that leaders should respect, and give attention to, the diverse and individual perspectives of stakeholders" (Bush,

2007, p. 399). The participative model emphasizes management focused on the collective values of stakeholders. Both models respect the diverse perspectives of stakeholders, democratic principles, and leaders who are accessible (Bush, 2007). One assumption of the investigator is that, in many instances, the organization in this study has operated within, and leaned upon, its symbolic structure and representation of itself. This has allowed leadership the option to stay the course and to work in isolation with routines and frameworks which may prove convenient from a management perspective, but which present gaps and significant concerns when it comes ultimately to serving teachers and students. The avoidance of conflict and the limitations to the development of productive, trusting relationships across levels of the hierarchy are potentially harmful to students and their families. "We seem hard-pressed to manage organizations so that their virtues exceed their vices. The big question: why" (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 6)?

Despite these limiting factors, contracting the services and expertise of consultants in the investigator's school may prove beneficial for a movement in a constructive direction. Information gathered from this research—examining relational trust from the ground up, a hallmark of social entrepreneurial leadership (Praszkier & Nowak, 2012)—may also contribute to the future development of improved practices and policies in this setting. Modifying an organization's structure to reflect contributions, working relations, and best intentions of all can only be effectively realized when these relational functions are established (Praszkier & Nowak, 2012; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Section Three: Scholarly Review for the Study (Literature Review)

Introduction

Since the beginning of education reform movements in the 1980s, many studies have examined collaboration and democratic models of school leadership (Hargreaves, 1994, 1996). Joseph (2018) defined collaborative leadership as "the presence of opportunities for shared leadership, educator ownership, and sharing of pedagogical ideas" (p. 2). Joseph acknowledged the importance of commitment by school leaders to support efforts and allow time for them to take hold. Major school reform initiatives and projects have focused on elevating the voices of teachers, staff, and other stakeholders in the leadership and governance of schools to create a more level playing field for school staff and to give those in non-administrative positions meaningful roles and appreciative views of the functioning of schools (Nias et al., 1989; Rosenholtz, 1989; Schliefer et al., 2017). Trust, and the cultivation of trusting relationships, have been found to play a significant role in the development and implementation of these initiatives (Moye et al., 2004). In this review of literature, some of the models and outcomes of studies will be discussed as they relate to school leadership, school culture, and relational trust.

Review of current literature related to focus of practice and Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Education/School Reform

Abu-Hussain (2014) presented a historical review of the education reform movement of the 1980s, and of school leadership models which have developed from the movement. Transactional and transformational models of leadership have emerged as contemporarily significant, in that they address leaders' communication of costs and benefits while remaining

sensitive to and cognizant of relationships and interactions. Aspects of this were echoed in the work of Bush and Glover (2014), who added that distributed or collective models, as opposed to singular ones, were important for developing collaborative leadership frameworks. Morality also was noted as a concern, where mutual understanding and appreciation by all parties engender less dissonance (Bush, 2007; Bush & Glover, 2014). The authors stressed the importance of theoretical understanding and acceptance by all stakeholders in choosing a leadership model. Embracing the theoretical underpinnings is crucial, the authors held, for fully realizing a leadership model in practice.

A central objective of school reform measures has been improved student engagement and achievement. John Dewey's (1916) work still holds prominence around school leadership and reform. Dewey's ideals of treating students as individuals, looking at the world through their eyes, and recognizing and supporting their potential to thrive, remain compelling considerations for contemporary reform efforts. Baird and Heinlen (2015) reiterated this sentiment, celebrating student learning as "open-ended, engaging, and fluid" (p. 144). They eschewed the enduring prevalence of standardized measures for evaluating students and teachers. Despite the politicization of public education, they argued that teacher voice is still present, but that it has been temporarily overtaken by *political actors*. The authors emphasized prioritizing students as individuals and embracing democratic values in drawing on the voices of many to define a path for meaningful and substantive change.

Darling-Hammond (2015) expanded some of the views expressed by Baird and Heinlen (2015), contending that schools, districts and policy makers are failing by continuing to rely on top-down measures to evaluate teachers and students, to drive instruction, and to develop

learning and achievement goals. Darling-Hammond (2015) implored educators and policy

makers to focus on the *opportunity* gap, and with it the *teacher* gap which has surfaced. She

argued that teachers need more time to collaborate and plan, and that they should be valued more

for their work. Darling-Hammond added that support within school settings should prioritize

teachers' needs along with early support programs and extended learning opportunities for

disadvantaged students. She acknowledged that placing real value and effort on addressing these

concerns appropriately represents a major shift in policy and practice in most public schools.

Without this movement, and with a continued reliance on top-down mandates, Darling-

Hammond (2015) warned that we will continue to lose teachers to attrition, and we will

underserve many students and their families as a result. Any significant reform efforts require

time, patience, and flexibility to evolve and work.

Leadership, Relationships, Efficacy, and School Culture

One theme which pervades many studies around school culture is that the principal, or

leadership in a school, can have a significant influence on the staff and their well-being, whether

the influence is perceived as positive and productive, or negative and counterproductive. An

abundance of research posits that leaders who listen, who seek and value feedback, are more

trusted and promote positive energy (Cameron et al., 2003; MacArthur-Blair & Cockell, 2018;

Rugat, 2006; Scharmer, 2018; Wheatley, 2005). The disruptive and generational roles of leaders

as social entrepreneurs (Praszkier & Nowak, 2012) are important factors in finding opportunity

for organizational change. ''[T]he (social) entrepreneur is inspired to alter the unpleasant

equilibrium'' (Martin & Osberg, 2007, p. 33). Social entrepreneurs work toward changing

existing attractors and identifying new, positive attractors. Social entrepreneurial models of

leadership allow participants to construct their own meaning from their engagement and relationships with others (Cisneros-Puebla, 2007).

Versland and Erickson (2017) described a principal's self-efficacy as a "set of beliefs that enable a principal to enact policies and procedures that promote the effectiveness of a school" (p. 1). In a mixed-methods case study, which included 18 teachers from a poor rural school district in Montana, they examined the effects that a principal's self-efficacy had on the collective self-efficacy of his staff, as perceived by staff. Relationship-building and fidelity to instructional initiatives on the part of the principal were found to contribute to collective self-efficacy. Positive effects were noted in the areas of instructional focus, leading by example, and developing teacher-leaders. The instructional initiatives promoted collaboration and increased individual and collective efficacy, which enhanced student achievement. The initiatives also contributed to the development of teacher-leaders in the school. Findings from these studies indicate relationships between collaborative models of leadership and perceived levels of trust within an organization.

Developing relationships with a constructionist view of leadership requires patience and humility on the part of all participants, especially leaders, who need to understand that they are part of a larger cohort of participants and that it is crucial to "expand the range of voices participating in the molding of the future" (Cisneros-Puebla, 2007, p. 7). In order for stakeholders to contribute meaningfully, they need to feel a sense of belonging and worth, so that their *slices of genius* may be shared (Hill et al., 2010). Stakeholders are more likely to share knowledge and ideas when they feel cared for, and heard (Wheatley, 2005)

Fairman and MacKenzie (2015) focused on the relational quality of teachers as leaders working collaboratively with a collective focus on maximizing student learning and achievement. Their research studied teacher-leader's perceptions of their roles and their influence on others. In this qualitative study the authors found that teacher-leaders built relationships with colleagues by modeling, coaching, collaboration, and advocacy within an environment of respect and appreciation. The teachers built relational quality among their colleagues, and the common focus on improving student learning conditions and outcomes solidified relationships, which influenced improved learning outcomes.

Quinn and Sprietzer's (2006) idea of a fundamental (vs. normal) state of leadership capitalized on relationships. Normal leadership empowers self-focused, internally closed and comfort-centered environments (to avoid risk, questioning or doubt). Fundamental leadership embraces results and internally directed values in focusing on the wellness of others, putting the best interests of the team first (Quinn & Sprietzer, 2006). This model is externally open and dynamic. It acknowledges the importance of environmental feedback and for adjustment as a result of this feedback, similar to double-loop learning (Morgan, 2006). It respects the process and its participants.

Findings from these studies suggest relationships between leadership practices and the perceived self-efficacy and group efficacy of teachers. Leaders who can promote strong relationships among and between the hierarchy of levels in their organizations will give their staffs voice and investment in the vision and practices defining their school's mission. Collaborative planning and decision-making, within an environment supported by sound relationships, are instrumental in the development of more positive leadership practices.

Trust in Schools

Trust as a factor in school reform efforts, specifically with respect to school culture, has emerged as a focus of research over the past three decades (Louis et al., 2010). McEvily et al. (2003) noted that despite the growing body of knowledge and research on trust in organizations, trust has been conceptualized and defined in varying ways. This discrepancy in conceptualization and definition has hampered consistent progress in this area of research. McEvily et al. (2010) called upon researchers to clearly define and conceptualize trust for their studies, and to adhere to a consistent definition of trust.

In recent literature around collaborative and democratic models of leadership in schools, *relational trust* between teachers and principals has come to the fore as a topic of focus, particularly as it contributes to the development of efforts by school systems to innovate and improve (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Related to Quinn and Sprietzer's (2006) notion of fundamental leadership, Tschannen-Moran (2014) noted that trust encompasses structural and mobilizing components. The structure of relatively stable and lasting interaction patterns contributes to mobilization by stakeholders within an organization. Contributing and coordinating resources and efforts for collective actions relies on the influence of trust.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) observed that "...the principal-teacher relationship provides a window into a school's trust dynamics" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 21), adding that "trustworthy principals help teachers and staff members solve problems, rather than interfering with their work through overly prescriptive policies or cumbersome reporting requirements" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 42). With respect to effective reform and leadership efforts, identifying needs for teachers, and the processes by which these needs may be met, will rely on

sustained efforts by leaders to establish relational trust in their organization (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

How might relational trust contribute to the development of leadership practices which promote teacher voice and efficacy? Demarco (2018) examined the relationship that leadership style has on school culture and teacher self-efficacy in central New Jersey middle schools. Authoritarian models in some schools were identified, ones which the author argued have worked against best practices and against the establishment of trusting relationships between leaders and teachers. Because leaders were consumed by demands from community members— and from mandates originating with central office administrators and school boards—their instructional leadership capacities were compromised. Demarco noted that this is a trend prevalent within public middle schools, one which has had detrimental effects on teachers and their students. Examining schools governed with more distributed leadership models, Demarco found that distributed leadership was associated with higher teacher-reported self-efficacy, noting significant relationships between distributed leadership and school culture, and between school culture and teacher self-efficacy.

Paradis et al. (2019) considered the relational aspects of teacher autonomy, as opposed to the individual, confining, and controlling dynamics of teacher autonomy which have been characterized in the literature. In a qualitative study of 12 Finnish teachers from six schools and 11 Canadian teachers from eight schools, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Through the inductive process, Finnish teachers expressed the importance of relational wealth, mutual respect, and trust as bolstering their independence as practitioners, whereas Canadian teachers tended to express doubt and distrust in colleagues, resulting in expressions of autonomy which

were more isolationist in comparison. This discrepancy speaks to the importance of leaders' roles in promoting and cultivating relational wealth among their teachers.

Barth (2002) also touched upon the confining aspects of teacher autonomy and isolation. When assumptions are drawn without explicit collaboration between teachers, or between teachers and leaders, school climate may be hampered by what Barth (2002) characterized as nondiscussables. Without implicit trust and collaboration, teachers may be reluctant to identify and discuss concerns in a public forum. As a result, the concerns endure and may become sources of anxiety, which contribute directly to issues around morale, psychological safety, and decision-making. Barth contended that a principal's leadership style contributes directly to these issues. Barth encouraged leaders to focus more on positivity and to embrace trust and collaboration as foundational for growth and improvement.

Using the organizational health inventory for middle schools (OHI-RM), Hoy and Hannum (1997) developed a rubric of health to assess climate in 86 New Jersey middle schools. In healthy schools principals were viewed by teachers as allies. These leaders can set high standards for practice through openness and respectful, supportive relationships. This alliance also impacted student achievement, as measured in reading, writing, and mathematics. Healthy interpersonal relationships were deemed essential to positive school climates. Healthy schools were identified as those in which all stakeholders—students, teachers, leaders, and community members—collaborate constructively. Schools, the authors concluded, "should be places where teachers and students want to be rather than have to be" (Hoy & Hannum, 1997, p. 308). They viewed school health as a "means to an end and an end in itself" (p. 308). These findings underscore the consequential significance of establishing positive, healthy school environments.

Trust Models and Scales

Niedlich et al. (2020) reviewed existing studies to conceptualize what they considered to be a comprehensive model for trust in educational systems. The role of trust was found to be scarce within multi-level systems. Related to this, Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer (2021) noted that, despite research findings, relational trust and its dimensions are described in only general terms. In an effort to address this deficiency of intricate details comprising relational trust, they conducted a qualitative study in Australian middle schools. Their findings replicated those of other studies conducted in elementary schools, which identified five dimensions of relational trust: interpersonal, interactional, intersubjective, intellectual and pragmatic. The five dimensions were found to contribute to the establishment and development of relational trust, and they also contributed to a culture within the schools which promoted transformative goal setting through professional learning opportunities.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) identified five facets of trust which characterize the interdependence and vulnerability within teacher-leader relationships: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. Briefly, benevolence entails caring, showing appreciation and support for teachers' efforts, and being fair. Honesty involves authenticity, integrity, truthfulness, and a willingness to accept responsibility. Openness is demonstrated by keeping communication channels open, and by sharing decision-making power. Reliability in leadership means being committed, dedicated, dependable, and consistent. Competence is demonstrated by leaders who work hard to respect teachers' time and responsibilities by maintaining a strong work ethic, being flexible and responsive to conflict and problem solving. Tschannen-Moran

(2014) posited that the relative emphasis placed on each facet is fluid, depending on the nature and level of interdependence and vulnerability within a given relationship.

The five facets of trust (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015) are important ingredients of trusting relationships within schools. The five facets frame positive and productive relationships between teachers and principals (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis., 2015). In a quantitative, correlational study, incorporating a series of rating scales, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) examined trust between teachers and leaders, leadership behaviors, climate, and student achievement. The study took place during the 2010-2011 academic year in 64 elementary, middle and high schools encompassing two districts (one urban, one suburban) and included over 3,000 participants. The authors found that, in both settings, trustworthy leadership correlated with a healthy school climate and high student achievement. Teacher professionalism also was found to be related to teachers' level of trust in the principal.

Northfield (2014) created a "three-dimensional trust model" (p. 434), based on results of qualitative research conducted in Canada, with 16 new principals and 16 experienced educators. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews to examine new leaders' perceptions of the qualities and strategies needed for building trust and for increasing educators' perceptions of trust in the leader. In the three-dimensional trust model, Northfield identified elements of character, care, and integrity as central to interpersonal and relational trust, within a structure of knowledge, competency, consistency, and task ability. The model was useful in illustrating the multi-faceted, layered, and interdependent aspects of building and sustaining trust within an organization. Northfield called for more research and training as a result of this study, noting that building trust, particularly for beginning leaders, is more deliberate, intentional, and task-

dependent than it is natural. Northfield proposed that school and district leaders create

professional development and education initiatives, for investigating and training new leaders

and staff to build relational trust. Finally, the author noted that exploring trust is important, as it

relates to the context of the school setting and to ethical leadership.

Drawing on findings from other studies linking a leader's perceived authenticity with the

positive performance of followers, Bird et al. (2012) examined relationships between a

principal's authentic leadership and the levels of trust and engagement of teachers, and teachers'

intentions to return to their places of employment. Three rating scales were used to measure

perceptions of authentic leadership, trust, and engagement: The Authentic Leadership

Questionnaire (Walumba et al., 2008); The Workplace Trust Survey (Ferres & Travaglione,

2003); and the Gallup Organization's Q12 survey, which measures employee engagement.

Teachers who rated their principals as more authentic were found to express more trust in the

principal, and more engagement in their work, which translated to a willingness on the part of

teachers to return to work in the setting. Based on the results of this study, the authors concluded

that, "because teacher trust and engagement levels vary with the level of principal authenticity,

clear importance is placed on developing authentic leader-staff relationships" (Bird, et al., 2012,

p. 445).

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) developed three trust rating scales for schools, the

culmination of extensive research in this area. The Likert-designed scales include The Student

Trust in Teachers Scale; The Parent Trust in School Scale; and the Faculty Trust in Students and

Parents Scale. While not specific in focus to this research study, the implementation of all three

of these scales with stakeholders would provide useful supplemental data to the findings of this study, or of studies further exploring relational trust in schools.

The dynamics articulated by the trust scales are reflected in the seminal work of Bryk and Schneider (2003), who stressed the importance of relationships in supporting a school's success. Relational trust encompasses role relationships and the social exchanges which take place between teachers and students, teachers and colleagues, teachers and parents, and teachers and their principal. Bryk and Schneider conducted a longitudinal study of school reform efforts, measuring trust in 12 communities encompassing 400 elementary schools in Chicago. The authors spent four years conducting interviews with leaders, teachers, and community members, observing classrooms, meetings, and events. Their qualitative measures were combined with periodic surveys conducted with teachers, leaders and community members. The authors found that trust among stakeholders contributed substantially as a *lubricant* for the day-to-day functioning of the school. The findings, consistent with those of other case studies, were that social interactions and relational trust were essential for fostering meaningful school improvement and reform efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

With respect to teacher-principal relations, Bryk and Schneider (2003) concluded that a leader's ability to establish and follow through with decision-making procedures which include and welcome the voice of teachers, and which instill in teachers a feeling of belonging and worth in the process, reduces teachers' feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness within the organization. They added that prioritizing social exchanges, relationships, and trust was foundational to supporting the success of a school. Results from the ambitious study pointed to the importance of cooperation and communication among stakeholders, in order to establish and

maintain relational trust. The authors described relational trust as "the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students" (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 45). They stressed the importance for leaders to respect the work of staff and students, to build and maintain the health and strength of this connective tissue.

In a study of over 500 elementary teachers in an urban school district, in which participants completed the multidimensional measure of psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1992), Moye et al. (2004) found trust to be essential for generating and maintaining the interactions which constantly occur in a school setting. The ultimate responsibility, they noted, rests with the leader, to initiate and promote trust via interactions, by communicating clearly, expressing confidence, and encouraging autonomy by providing opportunities for decision making.

Anchored by assertions from research, that trust among school personnel directly impacts a school's effectiveness and the success of its students (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001); and that effective PLCs rely on a culture of trust (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), Cranston (2011) conducted interviews with 12 principals leading public and private schools in Manitoba, Canada. Participants in the study, leaders of urban, suburban, and rural schools, responded to the following question: "What characteristics are identified by principals in their conceptions of schools as learning communities" (Cranston, 2011, p. 62)? Among the five themes which emerged from the study, three major points associated with relational trust were noted. First, relational trust was found to support effective collaboration. Second, faculty trust in the principal was deemed essential for the effective functioning of a school organization. Finally, the principal was identified as central in promoting and establishing

a climate of trust (Cranston, 2011). These findings support those of other studies (Bryk &

Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998), that developing and nurturing relational trust

among stakeholders contribute to productive and healthy PLCs, as a "glue" (Cranston, 2011, p.

59) which holds learning communities together. A key point noted by the author was that

cultivating and enriching these environments based on relational trust takes time, determination

and vigilance (Cranston, 2011).

McEvily et al. (2003) acknowledged trust as both relational and an expectation of sorts in

the management of unpredictable nature of organizations and the bounded rationality within

which they function. They emphasized the importance of identifying and making clear the

channels, or paths to success within an organization. Drawing on the work of Mayer et al. (1995)

and Rousseau et al. (1998), McEvily et al. (2003) defined trust as "the willingness to accept

vulnerability based on positive expectations about another's intentions or behaviors" (2003, p.

92). This implies the assumption of pre-existing connections among stakeholders within the

organization, which can serve as organizing principles, or expectations and intentions, which

guide and shape the organization's purpose and health. The authors held that trustworthiness, or

being worthy of receiving trust from others (Barney & Hansen, 1994), is necessary for trust

within an organization to be sustained.

In a qualitative study designed to identify actions and measures a transformational

school leader can take to build trust in schools, Browning (2014) examined teachers' trust

relationships with leadership from the point of view of staff. The author analyzed interview

information and cross-case data, identifying ten practices commonly used by highly trusted

leaders. These practices included openly admitting mistakes, actively listening, being visible,

caring for staff, providing affirmation, and remaining calm. The author and teacher participants had varying concepts of what actually defined trust, but in the end Browning (2014) described trust as "the lubricant that enables a leader to bring about transformative change" (p. 407).

Related to the manifestation and development of relational trust in a school setting, Karadag et al. (2014) examined teachers' perceptions of organizational cynicism and its effects on school culture and student achievement. School culture was defined as a manifestation of organizational culture, as a system of shared values, beliefs, and assumptions, ideals, goals and standards; and how these systemic pieces inform and drive the culture of a school. Cynicism was defined as one's outward negative attitudes and emotions; and frustrations about one's organization, with cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. In this causal research study, which included roughly 2,500 primary teachers at 100 schools in Turkey, the authors found that increased cynicism negatively impacted school culture and student achievement. This, they noted, could lead to problems of distrust, poor communication, and the undermining of relationships. This study demonstrated how school culture and student achievement might suffer in the absence of relational trust.

In a correlational study examining the relationship between principals' leadership approaches and the organizational trust of the teaching staff. Karsi and Inandiz (2018) characterized trust as positive thoughts, reliance on words and behaviors, and a sincere interest in the trusted individual. 722 participants were studied in Mersin, Turkey, within the context of autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership practices. The authors found a relationship between teachers' perceptions of their principal's leadership styles and their trust. Specifically, democratic leadership behaviors predicted positive trust; and democratic leadership behaviors

positively and significantly related to organizational trust. In other words, as democratic leadership behavior increased, so did trust.

Leis et al. (2014) examined collaborative leadership and relational trust among adults in elementary and middle schools in New England. Relational trust was described as organizational trust within schools created via social exchanges between members of one group and another. The authors evaluated the effectiveness of the Leading Together (LT) program, which is a standardized program designed for trust-building and community enhancement among adults in schools. LT is a professional development program for staff in K-12 schools. The basic purpose of the training is to help adults develop the capacity for building positive, trusting relationships, so that student achievement may improve. Based on three of Bryk and Schneider's (2003) determinants of relational trust, activities in the training include creating common norms and building interpersonal skills to cultivate respect, regard, and integrity (Leis et al., 2014, p. 836). In the sequential mixed-method study, the authors found that teacher-teacher and teacher-principal trust were much higher in schools where the program had been successfully implemented as compared to schools in which the program was not successfully implemented. The authors added that the collective knowledge of, and commitment to, the program, along with time, were significant factors contributing to the results.

The benefits of having a principal take a turn as a teacher have been connected to improved relational trust and leadership skills (Heubeck, 2021). Some leaders who teach have reported that the establishment and maintenance of relational trust is a natural outcome of this practice. By virtue of putting themselves in the shoes of the teachers, principals develop empathy and better understand the inherent challenges and experiences from the perspective of the

teachers. Furthermore, empathy and collaboration impact the culture of the school by strengthening ties which positively influence students (Heubeck, 2021).

Another outcome of principals regularly engaging in the practice of teaching has been the new perspective it has given them as decision makers. The experiences of teaching, along with the conversations and feedback they elicited with students, were found to influence leaders' procedural and pedagogical approaches, by virtue of the communication and collaboration they generated.

Findings from studies cited above suggest that trust in schools is viewed as reciprocal in nature. Weinstein et al. (2018) examined the role of positional power in building relational trust between teachers and principals. In a mixed-method study of subsidized elementary schools in the Valparaiso Region of Chile, the authors first conducted teacher and principal surveys which were developed around Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2001) five facets of trust. The surveys were Likert-like in design, and results were processed using a Rasch Rating Scale Analysis, to measure trust from low (level 1) to high (level 10) among the 205 principals and 1150 teachers who participated. This phase of the study served to identify participants for the qualitative, case study phase. Schools chosen for this phase demonstrated high, intermediate, and low levels of relational trust, based on survey results. The case study included observations of the school settings and meetings between the principal and teachers, followed by individual interviews with principals, selected individual teachers, and other groups.

Results from the Weinstein et al. (2018) study suggested that the levels of principal trust in teachers were lower than those for teachers' trust in the principal. Teachers' reported level of trust was found to be dependent on whether they received trust from their principal, as defined

by the principals' understanding and meeting the expectations, personal needs, and situational needs of teachers. Conversely, principals' perceptions of trust in teachers depended more on professional aspects, including teachers' work ethic and performance, and less on personal connections and empathy for their situations and needs. Some principals expressed the effectiveness and importance of remaining neutral, not getting too close, and not feeling they needed to be involved in personal needs or concerns of teachers. The authors concluded that the difference in positional power drove relational trust, that "while principals are the ones who set the rules, teachers are the ones who actually play the game" (Weinstein et al., 2018, p. 76). The priorities of principals in defining and establishing trust in this study veered from those suggested in the studies cited above. The authors suggested that broader cultural factors may influence aspects of trusting relationships in schools. These factors, they noted, are important to consider in defining and evaluating relational trust in schools.

One theme which pervades all of these studies is that the principal, or leadership in a school, can have a significant influence on the staff and their well-being, whether the influence is perceived as positive and productive, or negative and counterproductive. Establishing and maintaining relational trust can be challenging, particularly in today's environment, where increased community expectations and scrutiny on school leaders can influence efforts in this area. Despite the challenges, trust has been identified as essential for healthy, successful school environments, as it promotes collaboration among stakeholders (Tschannen-Moran, 2000), and as it contributes to authentic, collegial, and professional relationships between teachers and principals (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Leaders and teachers need to work on establishing and cultivating relational trust, which, depending on environmental and situational factors,

requires dedication, persistence, and patience (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Acknowledging the complexities of educational systems, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) noted that students, parents, teachers, and principals are *actors* and *acted upon* within the system, with and for each other.

Conceptual / Theoretical Framework

The paradigms within which one chooses to conduct research are critical. The questions being asked must reflect the assumptions one brings to a study. Being open to alternative views and checking one's assumptions through critical thinking will lead to more reliable research and more informed practice. "Interpretive methodology seeks an understanding of phenomena from [the] individual's perspective, investigating interaction among individuals as well as the historical and cultural contexts which people inhabit" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). In addition to the importance of participants' narratives within the context of their workplace, the idea that a theoretical framework may be adjusted or altered as it emerges during the course of a qualitative study is an important consideration (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

Philosophical frameworks

Creswell and Creswell (2018) identified four philosophical worldviews: postpositivist, constructivist, transformative, and pragmatic, as they are informed by different assumptions and outcomes, and as they apply to research. The investigator's current philosophical framework includes components grounded in the constructivist, transformative and pragmatic perspectives. From the constructivist angle, meaning generated from understanding one's world at work may be brought to the political and cultural landscape, so that an action plan may emerge to effect transformative change. The transformative perspective "holds that research inquiry needs to be

intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever levels it occurs" (Creswell, 2013, p. 9). This relies on a commitment on the part of leaders to work toward this change by providing voice for all stakeholders and addressing issues of oppression (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The pragmatic component of the investigator's worldview is focused on finding solutions for existing concerns, by looking at multiple perspectives and approaches, to discover what works.

Beliefs related to this worldview are tied to assumptions generated by the investigator's work experience as a teacher and counselor in the research setting for 25 years. As noted, during this tenure, the school has retained the frame of a top-down leadership dynamic, where roles and hierarchy have been strictly defined and followed. Control, rationality, and efficiency have pervaded a culture which is framed and sustained by rules, standardized procedures, and practices (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). Leaders may avoid opportunities for innovation and improvement, in order to preserve the comfort level of what is familiar.

This study's research and scholarship are grounded primarily in relational and transformational theoretical frameworks of leadership. Relational leadership "views leadership as residing not in individuals, but in the spaces among individuals" (Donaldson, 2007, p. 27). As Donaldson (2007) notes, schools consist of the relationships which are already in place among all stakeholders. Relational models of leadership seek to capitalize on these connections, using them to best serve the needs of students. Transformational leadership frameworks assume a commitment on the part of the leader(s) to the employees and their abilities, and to the process of change (Bush, 2007). Under transformational models, "[t]he aims of leaders and followers coalesce to such an extent that it may be realistic to assume a

harmonious relationship and a genuine convergence leading to agreed decisions" (Bush, 2007, p. 397). As with philosophical frameworks, theoretical frameworks are informed by the investigator's worldview and experiences in his organization.

Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical underpinnings of relational trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014), social-entrepreneurialism (Praszkier & Nowak, 2012) and participative leadership (Bush, 2007) are significant in driving the inquiry for this study. In social-entrepreneurial leadership models, employees construct their own meaning from their engagement and relationships with others (Cisneros-Puebla, 2007). As noted, developing relationships with a constructionist view of leadership requires patience and humility on the part of all participants, especially leaders (Cisneros-Puebla, 2007). Trust, and the building and sustaining of relationships among stakeholders, have emerged as key considerations in the development of more collaborative and psychologically safe school environments (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Investigating relationships, and perceived aspects of relational trust, may contribute to the development of leadership practices which respect the contributions of stakeholders (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Understanding the importance of establishing relational wealth (Leanna & Rousseau, 2000) and of cultivating relational aspects of organizations and employees, from the ground up (Praszkier & Nowak, 2012), informed the investigator's focus in conducting this research.

The qualitative methodological research design chosen for this study honored the narratives of the participants. The themes which emerged as data were examined had a significant bearing on the outcome of the study and implications for practice. Beyond paradigms

and methodologies, specific and effective ways to use research findings within a school setting rely on other factors working in tandem. In order to use research to inform our practice, additional components, or *legs,* have to be in place (Sackett et al., 1996). For example, using a new program in a school which has been hailed by leaders as *research-based* requires investment and education/training on the part of the instructors, along with a *fit* with student characteristics.

Teachers who know they are heard, in an environment where barriers to safe communication have been removed, and where the needs of students are prioritized, are likely to approach their work with more devotion and passion. Central to establishing relational trust in education is the importance of caring (Noddings, 2002). As "a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation" (Noddings, 2002, p. 283), education relies on leadership grounded in caring and relational trust.

Gaps in Literature Related to Focus of Practice

Despite the recent focus of research on the importance of relational trust in educational settings, studies and reviews of literature have demonstrated that many loose ends exist, as they relate to interpreting and measuring trust, and the complexity of models and approaches for defining and investigating trust. McEvily et al. (2003) noted that, despite the growing body of knowledge and research on trust in organizations, trust has been conceptualized in varying ways, and this discrepancy has affected consistent progress in this area. They called for researchers, in acknowledging the multifaceted nature of trust, to clearly identify a definition for their study, and to adhere to that definition consistently.

Niedlich et al. (2020), in their review of existing research around trust, pointed to the importance of bridging quantitative and qualitative methods of research under the umbrella of trust, so that systemic factors may be connected with more personalized and contextualized views from individual studies, such as this one. Noting the fragmented quality of recent research in this area, Niedlich et al. (2020) acknowledged the "pivotal importance" (p. 148) of trust for social cohesion and education, concluding that deeper, more organized research examining trust and its role in the education setting is warranted. "A systematic view of trust in education requires the triangulation of different theoretical approaches and understandings of trust, as well as specific empirical applications" (Niedlich et al., 2020, p. 148). Defining and distinguishing between varying interpretations of trust in organizations are important aspects to consider as one embarks on research in this area (Niedlich et al., 2020). Filling the gaps created by these varying approaches will be crucial, particularly as they apply to specific settings and demographics.

Summary of Scholarly Review

Much has been studied and written about the importance of relationships in organizational leadership. Tschannen-Moran (2014) described trust as inherently relational, in that it requires a trustor and trustee. One point which surfaces from the research is that trust, within an environment where it is promoted and encouraged, is a key ingredient in building relational wealth in organizations. Beyond this, assessing the culture of a school, and being able to understand behaviors and demographics within that culture, are important factors to consider before launching a research study.

Section Four: Contribution to Research

Introduction to the Contribution to Research

The focus of this study, as a dissertation in practice, dictates that research findings will likely contribute specifically to the practitioner setting. Despite these delimiting factors, the structure of the study, and the contributions by participants to the process and emergent findings, may serve as a foundation for a continuation of studies examining relational wealth and perceived leadership practices in other district schools or settings with similar demographics. Continuing examination of these phenomena as they manifest in other schools within the investigator's organization will rely on resources and permissions allowing for further inquiry.

Results/Findings of the Research Study

The initial phase of data analysis specifically focused on the interview transcripts from participants A and G. Participants A and G were chosen so that raw data could be examined from the participant with the most experience (25 years) in the organization and the participant with the least experience (10 years), as defined by the selection parameters. One point which stood out immediately, and one which prevailed throughout the coding and data analysis process, was the resilience of the teaching staff. Truebridge defines resilience as "The self-righting and transcending capacity within all youth, adults, organizations, and communities to spring back, rebound, and successfully adapt in the face of trauma, adversity, and/or everyday stress" (Truebridge, 2014, pp. 12-13). In her history of the study of resilience, Truebridge (2014) identifies an internal and external locus of resilience as a protective process, and one which has more or less evolved along a continuum. "As the study of resilience progressed, resilience moved beyond the scope of just recognizing *internal* personal traits, strengths, and assets . . . and

included the interaction of factors *external* to the individual—family, school, community, peer group, and other external systems" (Truebridge, 2014, p. 20). With respect to Participants A and G, internal and external loci seem at play here, but Participant A, with a significantly longer experience in the organization, had more of an external, systems focus than did Participant G, whose focus seemed to come from internal, protective, and survival concerns.

One interesting distinction noted between the participants was in the nature of the perceived resilience. Participant A's expression of resilience seemed more personally driven—buoyed more by extensive experience in the organization and recalling systems in place which had been motivating and had garnered support from teachers. This resilience was also noted in Participant A's more recent experiences, particularly those reflected in the perception of strong connections within the specific teaching team. Participant G's expressed resilience seemed more founded on the immediate support of others and less on a historical view of the organization's dynamics. Resilience in the case of participant G was borne more out of tight connections within the teaching team, and to a lesser extent among the teachers and staff specific to the grade level taught. The resilience presented more as a necessity for survival with participant G than it did for participant A, who had a more contextualized and historically deeper view. Resilience as a theme would manifest throughout the data analysis process, by virtually all participants in the study.

Another point which appeared during this first phase, and which endured throughout data analysis, was the perception of favoritism within the ranks of teachers. Participants A and G both commented on this, noting that some recent decisions based on favoritism directly affected morale and trust among the staff. Interview comments indicative of this included the following:

"Not all are treated the same here;" "If you are in with the principal, you are treated differently;" "There's pockets of folks who have power, who get things others don't."

Participants A and G also expressed experiences of isolation within the building. In both interviews, participants A and G discussed isolation of their own teaching teams and the disjointedness of staff. This sentiment would be noted among the rest of the participants as analysis progressed. Most participants attributed their perceptions of isolation and disjointedness to the building schedule and its constraints.

Following this initial overview phase with participants A and G, transcripts from all participants were In Vivo coded and arranged according to guidelines detailed by Saldana (2021), as described in the Data Analysis section. Codes were first organized by alignment with research questions. Frequency of codes with respect to their alignment with research questions was tracked and recorded, and sample codes were included.

To review, research questions were as follows:

1) What are teachers' perceptions of leadership dynamics within the school?

2) How do leadership approaches and practices impact the attitudes, voice, and perceived efficacy of teachers?

3) How do leadership approaches and practices impact perceived trust between teachers and leaders?

Codes were tallied for each participant and organized chronologically by years of experience. Findings are illustrated in Table 2. In Vivo code totals were listed for each individual question, and codes aligning with more than one question were also listed. Code alignment with more than one research question was expected, as the comments of participants in many instances aligned

with more than one of the three research questions. For example, the code "Programs chosen for us" connects with aspects of leadership dynamics (question 1), voice and efficacy (question 2), and trust (question 3). For clarification, examples of In Vivo codes corresponding to single research questions and combinations of questions, are included in Table 2.

Table 2

Research Question Number, Frequency of Corresponding Codes by Participant, and Corresponding Sample In Vivo Codes

Research Questions	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Total	Corresponding Sample In Vivo Codes (Saldana, 2021) (Teacher ID Code)
1	18	10	13	5	5	3	3	57	"Teachers have each other's backs." (B) "Schedule dictates" (A) "Supporting others' agendas" (A) "Turnover in administration" (C) "Not being given enough time" (F)
2	2	3	8	4	5	4	1	27	"There's a wait and see attitude" (D) "Been there, done that" (E) "We could alter things as we wanted. We could move things around." (D)
3	5	4	8	1	2	1	1	22	"Lack of trust between staff and the leader" (E) "Some is motivation. Some is job security" (D) "Because we talked about it, we did it." (E)
1 & 2	16	6	7	2	6	12	10	60	"We had autonomy" (D) "Consultant brought in to help you" (B)
1 & 3	20	14	4	6	3	0	5	52	"Different motives at play" (G) "Sense that things have been getting better since the beginning of the year" (D)
2 & 3	0	1	3	6	1	0	2	13	"Like who are we and who are you?" (C)
1, 2, & 3	16	6	3	2	6	12	9	55	"Told we have to do this" (A) "Programs chosen for us" (B) "Favorite sons and daughters" (E) "It comes down to trust" (F)

For most participants, numbers of codes were higher for those with more experience in the organization. Participants A, B, and C all had more to say about the organization from a historical perspective. An exception to this was with participant F, one of two participants with

the least amount of experience in the organization. Participant F's years in the organization had been interrupted for employment in another school, so those codes may have reflected this change in setting before returning to the research setting. Codes assigned to questions 2 and 3 in isolation were not plentiful. This speaks to the interrelatedness of the research questions. Overall, participants' comments about the organization aligned more with combinations of questions than they did for single questions.

As was suggested in the review of the literature, facets of trust and relationships were found to be connected (Donaldson, 2007; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Participants consistently expressed a lack of cohesion or connectedness with the greater staff population. Comments by participants indicate that they felt connected to colleagues on their teaching teams, but not to the faculty at large. This underscores the importance of the *glue*, or the cultivation of connections between people, which appears frequently in the literature (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Bush, 2007; Cranston, 2011). As noted earlier, stable and lasting interaction patterns have been found to contribute to stakeholder efficacy and contributions within an organization; and these aspects rely on the influence of trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

In the second phase of coding, In Vivo codes were organized by the three categories of historical, recent to current, and current to the future. The purpose for this was to get a sense for perceived trends in leadership dynamics, attitudes, and trust, as they have developed and changed within the organization. Sample codes accompany all three major categories to honor the voice of participants as part of this process and progression (Saldana, 2021). The broader themes and codes virtually all fall within the realm of organizational relationships. The outline (Figure 1) is intended to illustrate trends from 25 years ago to the present and with a view toward the future.

Presenting these points chronologically helps to illustrate, or to tell the story of, what has happened in the organization, what current or recent impressions are, and perceptions of where the organization is heading.

What continued to be evident from this arrangement of codes was that those with more experience in the organization (between 15 and 25 years) had a longer view of the history and evolution of change within the organization, than did those with fewer than 15 years of experience. For these veterans, having experienced times when there was more teacher voice within the organization was reflected in a more hopeful outlook for the future.

Figure 1

Outline of In Vivo codes (Saldana, 2021): Interviews with teachers, December, 2022

Organizational Relationships over time

I. "Remember how things worked" (A)

   A. "When I first started, I felt like we were unified"
      1. "People who felt empowered"
      2. "More equity in voices"
      3. "Everyone on same page"

   B. "Working toward something"
      1. "We knew where we were and where we were going"
      2. "You wanted to help"; "Helping each other"
      3. "You could just see it"

   C. "When I came here morale was sky high"
      1. "Teams worked together"
      2. "Coolest place to work"
      3. "Common planning time"
      4. "We had autonomy"
      5. "We had interdisciplinary units"
      6. "Schedule was flexible"
         a. "Block scheduling"
         b. "We met every other day"

D. "There was more community in the building"
    1. "Celebrations"
    2. "Whole school assemblies/gatherings"
       a. "Student of the month"
       b. "Community service"

II. "Not sure where we're going, just know we're moving" (D)

A. "Lack of relationships and identity"
    1. "Distinctly different team relationships"
       a. "Grade level teams tend to stick together"
    2. "Disjointed"/"Siloed"
    3. "Rather Isolating"
       a. "Just staying in my own lane"
    4. "Superficial"

B. "Schedule drives everything"
    1. "Schedule dictates"
    2. "No time"
       a. "You can't change your schedule"
       b. "Team meeting time drastically reduced"
    3. "No autonomy in planning"
       a. "Leaders cancel important programming"
       b. "Leaders preempt"

C. "Initiative frenzy"
    1. "Programs chosen for us"
    2. "For some philosophy"
       a. "Sort of a stepping stone for leaders"
       b. "Supporting others' agendas"
       c. "Questionable motives"
       d. "Where's the rationale?"
    3. "For the benefit of the school"
       a. "Best for whom?"
       b. "Best for what?"
    4. "Not our desire or choice"
    5. "Going to try this new thing"
       a. "We haven't finished the last thing"
       b. "What about the program that was working?"
    6. "Here we go again"
    7. "Don't ask me what I think when you've already made the decision"

D. "We are trying to be everything to everybody"

1. "Stretched thin"
2. "Administrators are stretching in too many directions"
3. "Overextended, disjointed"
4. "We do so much but it is scattered"
5. "Toxic positivity"
6. "Feels like spinning wheels"
7. "No time for community"

E. "Blanket of mistrust"
   1. "Trust within teams, lack of trust outside of teams"
   2. "Different answers from different people"
   3. "Some consultant brought in to tell me how to teach"
   4. "Some animals more equal than others"
   5. "The haves and the have nots"
   6. "If you are in you are treated differently"
   7. "Favorite sons and daughters"

III. "I think people are beginning to feel heard" (G)

A. "New energy within school"
   1. "Beginning of year felt better than last year"
   2. "Flurry of hope at the beginning of the year"

B. "Hopeful about new principal"
   1. "Great listener"
   2. "Takes notes, goes back to notes"
   3. "Still taking temperature"

C. "Wait and see attitude"
   1. "50-50 as to whether things will change"
   2. "Like a snowglobe has been shaken, waiting for flakes to fall"
   3. "Leaders are taking steps for bettering themselves"

D. "We have so much raw talent"
   1. "Devoted and passionate"
   2. "We truly are sitting on a goldmine"
      a. "Do the best I can every day"
      b. "We've got each other's backs"
      c. "We keep each other going"
      d. "Work hard"

E. "Teachers are invested in what we are doing"
   1. "Kids change everything"
   2. "Our students are amazing"
   3. "Makes me realize why I love my job"

In this sequence of coding, a chronological progression can be seen. Some high points were noted in codes recalling the past. Codes more aligned to recent and current events suggested relational challenges. The majority of the codes indicative of what lies ahead reflected resilience, hope, and mutual support on the part of the participants. As with the initial cycle of coding, in which codes were aligned with research questions, in general the comments of those with more experience in the organization were more grounded in a recognition of things which have worked. This translated to more hope for the future of the organization.

Findings from this coding sequence suggested that staff at all levels of experience share common concerns, and express common hopes, relative to their experiences in the organization. Again, the views of those with more experience seemed more grounded in hope. The existence of a capacity for things to improve is more evident in the responses of the veteran teachers. The reason for this may be that they have experienced situations and dynamics which they felt worked, and which they felt would improve. For the three teachers with the least amount of experience, (between 10 and 15 years), recollections of more recent events celebrating the school community stood out. These included whole school assemblies, grade level celebrations, and school-wide spirit weeks. A number of variables may be attributed to this variation among outlooks corresponding to years of experience. Certainly, years in the organization contribute directly to a variation among current and future views. The attrition in leadership positions, and the flurry of initiatives experienced by teachers at all levels of experience, affected all participants, but they were influenced differently by changing contexts over time. The claim by Darling-Hammond (2015), that successful school reform efforts can take years to develop, comes to mind here. Along with this point is the assertion by many researchers that the establishment of

relational trust, and organizational progress, depends on the interaction of multiple factors, and the allowance of time.

In the third phase of data analysis, In Vivo codes were further examined and organized into the three descriptive categories of expected codes, surprising codes, and codes of unusual or conceptual interest (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Ideas around expected codes are often in place before the actual study begins (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Suprising codes, ones which were not anticipated or expected, were identified during the coding process. Codes of unusual or conceptual interest, ones which emerged and were discovered during the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), were also noted.

Overall, expected codes, based on the investigator's own experience in the organization, revolved around trust, voice, community, scheduling, and initiative fatigue. While identifying these expected codes initially may have reflected the investigator's assumptions and biases, the uniformity of responses from participants reinforced these assumptions.

Surprising codes emerged from the interviews as well. An unexpected recurring code was the perceived favoritism participants saw between leaders and some staff members. As noted earlier, favoritism as a concern emerged during the first phase of analysis for participants A & G. Discussed in interviews, and overheard in team meetings and in casual conversation, staff members identified favoritism as a barrier to trust, equality of voice, psychological safety, and community. Participant C reported, "Individuals have been selected for grooming by leadership," and "I think there are many of us who don't feel tremendously valued." Participant D discussed "the haves and have nots" in the teaching staff, noting that "some animals are more equal than others." Participant E used the phrases "favorite sons and daughters" and "clickiness pieces" to

describe perceived favoritism. Participant F used the term "us and them" to characterize the divide between teachers who were favored and not favored. This dynamic was unexpected, not only for the perception, but also for its consistency.

The perceptions by all participants of the detrimental influence of the building schedule was also unexpected. Perceived confining aspects of the schedule were not surprising, but the emphasis the building schedule received from all participants, and the broad influence it was perceived to have on many aspects of instruction and collegial relationships, were not expected. Participants B, E, and G commented, "The schedule runs everything." Participant D, recalling earlier years in the organization, said, "We could alter our schedule as we wanted. We could move things around." Participant A, discussing the building schedule and its influence on the current isolation felt between and within teams the building, commented, "Interdisciplinary units are a thing of the past. We are too locked into a regimented schedule to find time to plan and flexibility to collaborate."

Codes of unusual or conceptual interest included metaphors and other descriptors used by participants to characterize the culture of the organization. This applied to both historically viewed assessments and to those focused more on the future of the organization. For example, three participants (B, C, and F) referred to the superficiality and hasty rollout of initiatives over time, likening them to "putting lipstick on a pig" or "lipstick on a corpse." Participant C characterized the building's recent culture as "a tornado with a rainstorm and a flood." Participant G described communication among staff as "a big game of telephone" and used "dog and pony show" in a description of initiative rollouts. Participant D, contemplating the future,

compared the organization to a snow globe: "The snow globe has been shaken again, and we are waiting to see where the flakes fall."

The isolation of teams, geographically and philosophically, and its contribution to levels of trust and support within teams, also seemed unusual in its consistency across respondents who presented it as a reality within the building. Comments related to trust within the organization frequently returned to an appreciation for the integrity and resilience of teachers' immediate team members. As noted earlier, related to isolation and disjointedness in the building, teachers, particularly those with fewer years of experience, discussed the benefits of whole school assemblies and activities, ones which unified the school community, and which for the time being rarely occur.

Looking at the greater population of teachers, all interview participants, and others whose comments were shared during meetings and informal conversations, hailed their colleagues' talents and resilience, and the interpersonal support and trust for one another. Another code of conceptual interest was in the willingness of teachers to be open to the new leadership in the building, and to share their initial impressions after half of an academic year. Comments in the interviews tended to trend from "been there, done that" or "here we go again" to "things seem different now" and "the new leader listens, wants to hear what's working, what isn't, how we may change."

Many codes reflected aspects of professional relationships, trust and voice. Comments around trust and voice included the following:

"It comes down to trust"; "The gist that you get is that people do not trust administration"; "not a lot of trust"; "feel like trust has been lost"; "don't get the idea that it won't happen again"; "Your

input is not going to matter;" "told we have to do this;" "asked for input, other decisions made." Such comments all touch upon relational interactions between teachers and administrators. Most of these comments were made in the context of participants' discussions of leaders' decision-making practices and their history of rolling out initiatives, in many cases to the complete surprise of teachers.

As discussed above, other indirect causes of relational deficits were voiced in the overwhelming concern by participants, and in team meetings and conversations, about the building schedule. All study participants have been around for long enough to see the schedule change from one affording more autonomy in programming and time for individual and team planning, to one where a more rigidly structured schedule drives the day-to-day activity in the building. The current building schedule has reduced the amount of time teachers have to plan, and to work together on interdisciplinary units, and it also has contributed to an environment in the building where teachers and their teams are isolated within the building for much of the day.

The schedule has also curbed availability of programming and time for community gatherings within the building. Few opportunities exist for teachers to interact with colleagues outside of those on their teaching teams during the school day. Those whose perceptions were shared during interviews, team meetings, the book group, and in informal conversation, consistently identified the building schedule as a primary reason for the lack of connectedness and support they felt. Participant C reported "distinctly different team relationships" as a result of the building schedule, and the lack of flexibility it allowed. Participant D reported spending weeks after school, working with the scheduling committee and making progress, only to find

that the culmination of these efforts was a return to the default schedule, or attractor (Praszkier & Nowak, 2012) they began with. This speaks directly to staff concerns around voice and trust.

These perceptions directly contradict the philosophy behind the house-based organizational structure instituted in the school 10 years ago. The house structure is intended to promote continuity and community among grade level teams and from one grade level to another. Students loop as teams from grades six to eight, along with their grade-level administrators and school counselors. The promotion of connectedness in a house system is especially valuable for larger middle schools. "Such arrangements foster the long-term student-teacher relationships known to have educational and developmental value during these transition years" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 50). Why would a structure designed to promote relationships and consistency yield uniform perceptions of disjointedness, isolation, and lack of trust outside of specific teams within the organization? The building schedule stands as a primary reason. Baird and Heinlen (2015) discussed the standardized practices which rigid schedules can dictate and support, noting that they can hamper efforts at school reform. Such schedules do not support the need for teachers to collaborate regularly and with any depth (Darling-Hammond, 2015). This contributes to teachers' perceptions of not being valued.

Where building initiatives originate is not always clearly communicated to teachers. The principal's capacity as an instructional leader can be compromised by mandates and directives attached to the initiatives, which often come from senior leaders and school board members (Demarco, 2018). The shared practices and planning which may support an initiative's development and success often do not fully materialize, largely due to these pressures. Another concern of teachers, related to initiatives and scheduling, is that the timeframe for implementing

measures is not sufficient. This also was found to influence perceptions of trust and good faith among staff members.

The isolating effect of the building schedule has kept teachers and students from developing deeper, trusting relationships, and from cultivating valuable interpersonal, interactional skills—in other words, for learning how to interact with one another (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The isolation felt by teachers has restricted their autonomy and ability to share, to the point where a lack of collaboration and relational feedback can further isolate those teachers and harden their assumptions (Barth, 2002). This underscores the importance of a building schedule which affords time for teachers to collaborate. Establishing relationships within the school setting depends on daily opportunities for teachers to meet and plan as a team. Ample time for teachers to meet as PLCs is also essential (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Tschannen-Moran (2014) contends that problem-solving depends on active helping and collaboration between leaders and teachers. This means avoiding an overreliance on top-down, prescriptive mandates and reporting requirements. Trust lies at the core of this. These data also reflect the need for relationships beyond isolating constraints of classroom boundaries and team areas. Trust in schools depends on interpersonal, interactional qualities, within an environment which promotes the sharing of knowledge and strategies across content areas (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021).

A general finding, gleaned from interviews and supplemental communications within the organization, is that relational trust is lacking in this organization. Establishing trust can be challenging, as Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) note. It does not just happen, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Developing a model of trust depends on an understanding of the

relationships at play, and the interventions, time, and work required. Elements of the five facets of trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014), including the qualities of caring, honesty, integrity, and authenticity, all apply here and seem obvious when considered in the context of relational trust. For the participants of the study, particularly those with the most experience, there was a time during their tenure where these elements were realized.

Based on the perceptions of the participants, and on views expressed by teachers during meetings and casual conversations, the organization presents as one where the teachers' resilience, devotion to their craft and students, and hope rise above the concerns, disillusionment, and disjointedness they have experienced, particularly in recent years. Some of the concerns, given the turnover of leaders in the school since it opened a quarter of a century ago, were to be expected. The continued resilience of staff, be they seasoned veterans or those with less experience, came through in all of the interviews. An example of resilience and hope was evident in participant F's comments crediting the new principal's interest in hearing staff impressions: "How can you come to a place like this as a leader and not take that wealth of knowledge and experience and use it to your advantage?" A devotion by the teachers to their work, and to their students, was another consistent theme. Comments like "kids change everything" (Participant C); "We have the best group of kids" (Participant D); and "Students and teachers keep each other going" (Participant B), all speak to this. This level of devotion and collective resilience was impressive.

Triangulation of findings occurred via information generated from some of the improvement efforts currently in progress in the organization, which are focused on climate, culture, and morale. Information corresponding to the interview data was evident in AMLE

survey results, overheard comments in the building, book group discussions and team meetings, and in casual conversations with teachers. Themes which emerged reflected teachers' concerns around transparency, honesty, trust, and integrity. In one meeting a group of seventh grade teachers discussed the confining nature of the building schedule, and the restrictions it placed on collaboration, innovative teaching, and autonomy.

Results from the AMLE survey of staff members indicated concerns around relational wealth and the building schedule. Low scores were reported by staff with respect to the school's provision of opportunities for students to meet in small groups to discuss issues and concerns. Similar results were reported for teachers, who indicated the lack of time to meet as problematic. One teacher commented, "We don't allow relationship opportunities for adults in the building." Another teacher shared, "We are trying to be innovative within a schedule which does not allow for it." Other feedback from the teachers reflected concerns around psychological safety, and a need for more activities to promote community within the building.

In the AMLE book group, which met weekly after school for four consecutive weeks, teachers lamented a perception that they were expected to do and be everything, and they felt their hands were tied without daily common planning time. They longed for more opportunity to celebrate the school community, both within the classroom and under the larger realm of school-wide activities. In brainstorming what they felt they do well as a staff, teachers in the book group identified specific situations in which students had benefitted from increased attention and creative classroom activities. In another activity, where a basic road map for improvement and innovation was considered, conversations tended to focus on ideas which would most benefit students, such as flexible seating in all classrooms, a designated recess period, and consistency in

modeling, following and enforcing school rules, procedures and policies. This focus on students and learning, and a vision toward innovation and change, also came through via the coded interview data, through conversations with teachers in meetings, and through feedback generated from surveys and the work of consultants. Even in light of what teachers expressed as significant barriers to progress, there exists a resilience among this staff which sustains it and propels the development of improvement efforts, with hope.

The findings from this research touch upon the investigator's worldview, philosophical frameworks, and theoretical frameworks. A transition from the traditional, top-down leadership dynamic experienced by many, to a more relational model of leadership requires an emphasis on connections: on how individuals interact and collaborate. The push for connectedness and relational wealth for the benefit of leaders, teachers, and their students, relies on leaders' commitment to change, and on the patience and openness of leaders and teachers alike in honoring the process. Transformational change is viable only when ideas and visions of leaders and followers combine, converge, and coalesce (Bush, 2007). The importance of relational trust in reaching this point, where decisions reflect the convergence of ideas from teachers and leaders, cannot be overstated.

Understanding perceptions of reality from the points of view of individual teachers, and how those perceptions were informed by relationships and contexts over time, can contribute to efforts to move away from a hierarchical, rigid leadership dynamic (Creswell, 2009). The narratives of all study participants, combined with supplemental data, speak directly to the need for building relationships from the ground up. Elements of social entrepreneurship (Praszkier &

Nowak, 2012) participative leadership (Bush, 2007), and relational trust (Tschannen-Moran,

2014) all can contribute to a culture of collaboration, trust, and psychological safety.

As indicated earlier, a plan for transformative change acknowledges the generation of

meaning and an understanding of the workplace from the perspectives of all stakeholders. The

voices of teachers in this study are crucial in developing a school-wide vision inclusive of a plan

for improvement and transformative change. Addressing concerns and working toward solutions

will work most effectively when the perspectives of teachers, leaders, and students, combined

with the work of consultants, are prioritized. Perceptions of the participants in this study suggest

that voice, community, and trust, in a setting which allows for safe communication and ample

time to collaborate and plan, are foundational for authentic and lasting change.

Target Journal and Rationale

To the degree that the results of this dissertation in practice may be accessed, shared, and

used by others in the education community, The journal *Educational Leadership* (EL) would be

a sound platform from which to publish. EL, a publication sponsored by ASCD, formally known

as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, has been an established

educational journal since 1943. Contributors to EL are identified by readers as peers and

practitioners in education, a point which distinguishes EL from other publications. The openness

and the magazine's format, where articles are accessible, timely and relevant, benefit subscribers

and contributors in connecting and networking with one another to develop their practices.

Whereas many journals reflect the contributions of "researchers for researchers" within a specific

topic area, EL is a widely circulated journal disseminating the findings of "educators for

educators," be they leaders, instructors, or active educational leadership students.

Articles in EL generally are engaging, conversational in quality, and pertinent. Submissions appearing in EL magazine and on its ASCD-sponsored website (https://www.ascd.org/el) often become the topic of formal and informal discussions among stakeholders in the investigator's organization. As a fixture in the mail room of the research setting, ER is perused and read by many of the investigator's colleagues. The availability, readership, and demographics of timely contributions, all are a good match for meaningful and accessible reporting about this study. EL promotes itself as a journal for educators, by educators. With respect to this specific study, findings would be appropriate for the proposed theme of the May, 2024 issue of EL, which focuses on teacher agency. From the EL online submission manager:

May 2024: The Power of Teacher Agency

Teachers need autonomy and discretion to develop their practice and improve student learning. They also need to know their voice matters in school decision making. Yet with top-down policies, one-size-fits-all PD, and prescriptive instructional mandates, such agency can feel elusive. How can schools and districts restore teacher agency in this highly politicized, post-pandemic era? How can leaders provide that sweet spot between what educator-author Paul Emerich France calls "total independence and soul-crushing restriction"? This issue will unpack the power of teacher agency—and outline strategies for cultivating it.

As a publication of the ASCD, and as a journal which welcomes and relies heavily on unsolicited manuscripts for many of its published articles, EL is at once appealing to educators, and welcoming to points of view. Tangible resources exist for educators to share and use in their daily practice and the information and references in the articles are comprehensive enough for those who wish to explore areas more deeply, either for their own research or for developing practice. Publishing these findings in EL will allow access for those in similar settings, and those who have an interest in relational wealth and trust and teacher voice. EL's contents reflect the

significance of resources and information which serves educators and, most importantly, their

students.

Section Five: Contribution to Practice

Introduction to the Practitioner Contribution

The findings of this study, and their contribution to practice, are promising. As noted, this dissertation in practice focuses on, and is intended to inform, the organization within which the research took place. The results suggest a desire on the part of the participants, within the organizational setting, to have more voice, and to be valued more for their expertise and efforts in their chosen profession. The overlap of these findings with the current schoolwide improvement efforts may prove useful in providing a more comprehensive, contextualized picture of where this organization is, and where it hopes to be.

Practitioner Contribution

Findings of this study may directly inform efforts already being made by our leadership team to be more open, and to listen to concerns of teachers. As noted previously, efforts have been extended by our building administrators to listen, to plan faculty meetings around activities designed to get people out of their seats and interacting with one another. Notes and outcomes from the discussions and activities are preserved and shared out with staff after the meetings. It remains too early to gauge how this approach is working, and how effective it may be, but the shift to meetings which seek contributions of all, as opposed to those which traditionally were run and restricted to the voices of administrators, seems promising. Casual conversation with other faculty members reinforces this. As one veteran teacher commented, "The ears are more active this year than they've been in a long time." Initially many were put off by what they believed was another initiative, for which outside experts, vetted by building and district leaders, were brought in to facilitate. Teachers expressed frustration at yet another approach spearheaded

by leadership, likely a superficial change which many believed served the needs of leaders more than the staff. Assumptions were that the activities, like initiatives which preceded them, would not be executed with any fidelity. Now, however, there is a sense in the building, particularly among veteran teachers, that things are beginning to look different. The work of consultants, and the organization's involvement and investment with AMLE, support this. Findings from this study may be instrumental in informing and supporting these efforts, particularly as they may develop and evolve over time. An added benefit lies in the work of other researchers in the organization and district, discussed further below.

Plan for Dissemination

With respect to this specific study and the findings, dissemination of results for staff might best begin with an appreciative inquiry focus (MacArthur-Blair & Cockell, 2018), where smaller groups of staff with varying lengths of experience meet to first share ideas and strategies which have worked for them as educators. Staff members with extensive experience could share a story or a recollection about something which worked, specific to the organization. Giving those with less experience information about how and why things worked may help them to see more readily that the possibility exists for improvement. In addition to this, these experiences may prove helpful as an additional point of reference for current improvement efforts underway in the organization.

Viewed from the perspective of the larger organization, at the time of this writing, five leaders within our school district have completed, or are in the process of completing, research studies which focus in some part on improving aspects of the organization. Their studies have examined aspects of authenticity, hope and appreciation, transformational leadership, strengths-

based-collaboration, and school culture and teacher efficacy. Data from all of these studies were generated by participants employed within the district. Examining the findings from this study, as an element of the combined findings of these other studies, may afford a broader platform from which contributions to practice may develop. It seems feasible and potentially beneficial that the merging of findings and plans for dissemination may have a more comprehensive impact, if considered carefully. A plan for dissemination in this realm would depend on input and agreement of cooperating parties, and an approach which includes and honors the voices of stakeholders. This idea remains one which the investigator hopes to develop with the other researchers.

Dissemination of results and action plans will be worthwhile only if stakeholders understand and have an investment in their importance, or the *why* behind the work which goes into them (Sinek, 2011). With this in mind, presenting the findings, either sequentially or in a thematically integrated form at a whole staff meeting will not be effective. Results and implications of the findings must be presented among smaller groups of participants, in a setting allowing for safety to ask questions and offer feedback. It would be unrealistic to expect that such an approach, or any approach, for that matter, will yield universal acceptance and enthusiasm; but presenting information within a forum which allows participants to comment, make suggestions, and ask difficult questions, will be most effective.

Respecting the time and the voice of the participants, and incorporating ongoing conversation into the process, can help to build connections and relational trust which have been in decline in the organization. This gets at the notion of structural functional theories of social entrepreneurial leadership (Praszkier & Nowak, 2012), where relational wealth has to be

established before any real structural change may occur. To this end, it seems imperative that, however dissemination may be planned, the conversations should be prefaced with the promise and genuine acceptance of ground-up contributions, which honor the voices of teachers and staff. Moreover, leaders and teachers need to respect and honor the process as a fluid and iterative one, open to interpretation and modification as it evolves. Opportunities for reflection and reality checks need to be built into the process. Just as importantly, opportunities must be taken for celebrating progress and small wins. It is the belief of the investigator that, without the *glue* of relational trust, attempts at innovation and improvement will fall short of their potential.

Cultivating trust within the organization will be essential, and it does appear that leaders in the building and at the district level have begun to take to heart the significance of concerns shared. Efforts are in place to harness the contributions of stakeholders at all levels within the organization. This upswing, demonstrated in the work of consultants and the generally positive reactions to their interventions, is bolstered by the introduction of a leader new to the building, who is perceived by many to care about what people have to say. Despite some of the challenges and hardships identified in the interviews, virtually all participants were forthright in their beliefs that the staff in this school are second to none. This alone is as sound a foundation and encouraging impetus for change as one could hope for. The staff were described as great, as a goldmine, as having a tremendous amount of raw talent. No structure will stand for long without a firm foundation, and secure, appropriate connections need to exist from the foundation to the roof for it to withstand rough spells and storms.

Section Six: Practitioner Reflection

Summary of the Inquiry

The inquiry driving this study highlighted the importance of relational trust. Relationships and trust were examined within the context of an organization in the midst of extensive change efforts. These efforts came about as a result of a history which saw high turnover in leadership, inconsistent leadership practices and schedule structures, and the gradual isolation of teachers and teams within the building. These conditions gave rise to concerns around staff morale, culture, and community. In this study, teachers within the organization with varying levels of experience shared impressions, ideas, and historical recollections of systems and structures contributing to the existing state of the organization. Positive themes emerging from this study were resilience, hope, and support among teachers, which supports the possibility for a future of growth and improved relational trust.

Personal Learning, Shifts, and Transformations Related to the Focus of Practice

From the investigator's perspective, as a former teacher and school counselor in the organization for more than 25 years, this experience has been extremely valuable. Findings from the research, some of which were expected, and some of which were unexpected, have shifted the investigator's thinking significantly. It is easy to become ensconced in the day to day of the organization. As a long-standing member of the staff and a colleague with social capital, the investigator has been exposed to feedback from teachers and staff at all levels in the organization. This was instrumental in initiating plans and in driving this research, and also in identifying points and directions for progress. Interactions with interview participants, supplemented by full staff meeting notes, team meeting notes, the contributions of consultants,

and informal interactions with staff within the building, all compelled the investigator to seek a deeper understanding of, and respect for, the systems contributing to the culture of the organization. Gathering and analyzing data in this study suggested that more is at play than what was initially assumed. The findings have been helpful for adding perspective and breadth to the investigator's initial assumptions and biases.

This endeavor has philosophically expanded the investigator's boundaries of practice. Inasmuch as this study is focused by definition as a dissertation in practice, the work, inclusive of the contributions and support of many, has broadened the investigator's perspectives to include ideas adapted from others. As a long-standing employee familiar with the organization, this has perhaps been the most valuable takeaway from this process. Looking at and learning about this area of inquiry from the perspectives of many allows the investigator to approach work with more knowledge and a genuine interest and enthusiasm for continuing to work toward progress.

Personal Learning, Shifts, and Transformations as an Educational Leader

As a learning area leader in the organization, and one whom the superintendent has described as a "colleague to everyone," the investigator will use findings from this research and the depth of rich information from the literature review to approach situations more broadly and with more patience. This means, in part, remaining open to and appreciative of the experiences and perspectives of colleagues. The resilience of the staff, one of the first points which emerged from the raw data, underscores all of this. The resilience which emerged initially, and which became more evident with repeated coding cycles, was transformative. Because of this resilience, teachers continue to support one another, even in situations where isolation between

teams is troublesome, and where a schedule has significantly reduced opportunities for teachers to meet and plan. Most teachers remain hopeful, and all seem devoted to their practice and their reasons for teaching. Without this resilience, this organization would be in a more challenging situation. Looking forward, these considerations are essential for progress, even if challenges inherent in the structure, history, and culture of the organization continue to prevail. This does not represent a fight, but rather an opening of minds, with patience and appreciation of alternative points of view. Connected with this idea, Truebridge (Linkedin, 2023) has argued that the definition of resilience as "bouncing back from adversity," should more appropriately be rephrased as "bouncing forward from adversity."

Personal Learning, Shifts, and Transformations as a Scholar

Personal learning as a scholar is difficult to quantify, as the process is fluid and ongoing. Intensive reading, writing, thinking, and conversation about this and other areas of interest have been extremely valuable. As noted in the previous section, working in the same setting with the same people for an extended time can be comforting, but it also can be restrictive, if one allows it to be. Engaging in this program, with its intellectual depth, influences, and rigor, and with the support of many, has broadened the investigator's views and opened opportunities for continued exploration. New connections made throughout the program already have contributed to opportunities and endeavors in other areas.

Implications for the Future

Peter Drucker is credited with the phrase, *Culture eats strategy for breakfast* (Conmy, 2022). Basically, this means that even the best strategies and best laid plans will not succeed without an organizational culture founded on respect and integrity, and the engagement of its

members (Conmy, 2022). A combination of factors, including high turnover rate of building principals, a debilitating pandemic, decades of top-down leadership, numerous initiatives, and a confining schedule has limited genuine opportunities for the attainment and development of relational trust in this organization. Culture within the building has suffered, and, until recently, organized, concerted efforts to address concerns around culture, morale, and trust have been avoided or overlooked—or tabled in favor of other initiatives. Some of the themes emerging from the research speak directly to this.

In this study, teachers reported an overall malaise with the same old leadership dynamic. The organization's reputation and the symbolic rituals supporting it have overshadowed any real, in-depth acknowledgement of cultural issues which have hindered progress. The schedule driving the day-to-day functioning of the school does not allow for flexibility, creativity, or sufficient planning time for teachers. This is not to say that the organization is somehow doomed. What it does say, however, is that long-held traditions and practices, and the propensity for unilateral decision-making which does not solicit the ideas of staff and students, have created an environment in which many teachers no longer attempt to contribute ideas, believing that their voices do not matter and that consequential change will not occur.

Where does this leave the organization? It is a belief of the investigator that, to move forward, with hope, there is a need to acknowledge how past events have contributed to where the organization currently stands, not to the extent that they should be dwelled upon, but also not with an approach which minimizes or denies their significance in shaping the current structure. Core human values need to be embraced and modeled in addressing concerns and moving forward. The district-wide response to the COVID-19 pandemic was driven by these values; it

harnessed the energy and efforts of many and a selfless devotion to reaching and supporting those in need. The feeling was that all were on board with these efforts. Trust, honesty, integrity, humility, kindness, and hope, all within a climate of genuine caring, supported these efforts. A genuine, collective appreciation for these values may guide more focused efforts to realize lasting innovation and change within this organization.

Change needs to come from within, that it needs to authentically reflect the voice and contributions of stakeholders at all levels. This begins with building and cultivating trusting relationships. Core human values are central to this. Hope for the future was a sentiment which came through in all of the interviews conducted for this study, and also in supplemental data. Harnessing the hope and using it as an ingredient for change may sound overly ambitious and simplistic to some, but as a lever for improvement efforts within this organization, hope can keep all on track and invested in the process. Patience, purpose, and best intentions also support these efforts in identifying and seizing opportunities for slow and steady progress. In pursuing these opportunities, it will be important to understand that things may get worse before they get better (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Too often this organization's leadership has pulled the plug on efforts for progress when any resistance or signs of decline in morale have manifested.

The fundamental importance of trust in developing a school environment that benefits all cannot be overstated. One of the consultants brought into our school made the point that trust is built through predictability and consistency of character. He added that this is not necessarily always positive, but that consistency, persistence, and grit are important. The development of mutual trust will rely on building emotional grit through practice. He likened this to repetitive practice drills common in sports, where progress comes from practice and patience, and team

solidarity. He compared improvement efforts in the organization to a relay race in which all

stakeholders have legs. The race itself is a long one, requiring sequenced practice and ample time

for preparation and teamwork. A top-down approach may be expedient, but it has a tendency to

prioritize larger shifts and comprehensive results over the details and parts of the process. This

dynamic can bring with it unintended consequences. A collective contribution from all

participants depends on a feeling of belonging and a focus on smaller shifts and gradual progress.

The culture of any school will benefit from these considerations.

The organization at the heart of this study, like many other organizations, is one where

routines and rituals have driven a system predicated on a top-down approach, where the priorities

of a few have at times limited the practices and potentials of stakeholders to honor and serve our

students and their families as effectively as possible. Most initiatives have derived from limited

exposure by leaders to ideas and approaches. The perspectives and experiences of those who

work directly with our students and families have not often entered the arenas of decision-

making, planning and innovation. Opportunities for lasting change, for *moving up and looking

forward,* will depend on leaders' concerted efforts to honor and respect the voices of their

employees.

As the focus of this study, this middle school is as effective, successful, and strong as the

relationships which define and support it. Leaders should seek to capitalize more on these

connections. Bolman and Deal (1997) framed leadership as "a subtle process of mutual influence

fusing thought, feeling, and action to produce cooperative effort in the service of purposes and

values of both the leader and the led" (p. 226). Any attempt to effect meaningful progress in this

organization will fail without trust and openness. This will require an acknowledgement and

effort by leaders to remove of barriers to fair and honest communication, positivity and authentic

self-expression (Ravitch & Carl, 2019), so that we may nurture and celebrate lasting change.

Appendix A: **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

adapted from Creswell & Creswell (2018)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

Would you be willing to share some information about your educational background?

How long have you worked in this organization? Can you provide details about your roles during this time?

How would you describe the culture in this school during your employment here? Give specific examples.

How would you characterize the climate in the building? Give specific examples.

What is your sense about how colleagues perceive culture and climate?

How would you describe, or characterize, your experiences with leadership in our school? What are your impressions?

What changes have you seen or experienced during your employment here?

To what extent do you feel supported by administrators to carry out your work effectively?

How does trust manifest, as you see / understand it?

How do you see that affecting the culture or the climate of the school?

What do you see happening in our school, moving forward, with relation to what we have discussed?

Probes:

Can you elaborate on that?

What do you mean by . . . ?

Are there any details or examples you can provide?

Has this perspective changed for you? How?

Closing Instructions: Thank you for participating! I want to assure you that your interview will be kept confidential. Should it be necessary, would you mind participating in a second interview? If you would like, I would be happy to share with you the abstract of my study when it is completed. Thanks again.

Appendix B: Permission to conduct study

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE UNIT SIXTEEN

SAU16

EXETER REGION COOPERATIVE

EXETER	STRATHAM
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Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction

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Director of Student Services

October 14, 2022

Southern New Hampshire University
School of Education
2500 North River Road
Manchester, NH 03106

This letter serves as approval of Steve McDonald, School Counselor at the Cooperative Middle School to conduct his doctoral research with staff participants at our organization. We have reviewed his doctoral proposal and approved his research at our site.

Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.

Thank you,

Esther Asbell

Esther Asbell, Ed. D.
Associate Superintendent
SAU 16
easbell@sau16.org
603-775-8655

You belong here.

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Appendix C: Invitation to Participate

Adapted from Carleton.edu (n.d.)

Email Invitation:

Subject： Invitation to participate in a research project on Teachers' Perceptions of Relational Trust, Leadership and Culture in a New England Middle School.

Hello,

My name is Steve McDonald, and I am a doctoral student in the department of Education at Southern New Hampshire University. I am working on a research project under the supervision of Dr. Charles Littlefield.

I am writing to you today to invite you to participate in a study entitled "Teachers' Perceptions of Relational Trust, Leadership and Culture in a New England Middle School." The purpose of the study is to gain teachers' perceptions of leadership practices in the school, as they connect with aspects of trust, culture, and climate.

This study includes one 60-minute interview with participants, which will take place in a mutually convenient, safe location. With your consent, interviews will be audio-recorded, and video-recorded, via Zoom. Once the recording has been transcribed, it will be deleted.

Care will be taken to protect your identity. This will be done by keeping all responses confidential, and by allowing you to request that certain responses not be included in the final project.

You will have the right to end your participation in the study at any time, for any reason, up until January 31, 2023. If you choose to withdraw, all the information you have provided will be destroyed.

All research data will be password-protected. Any hard copies of data including will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office at CMS). Research data will only be accessible by the researcher (and the research supervisor).

This research has been cleared by the Southern New Hampshire University Internal Review Board, Research Ethics Board Clearance # IRB-FY2022-115.

If you have any questions regarding this project, you may contact me at smcdonald@sau16.org. If you have questions regarding your rights as research participant or any concerns regarding this project, you may report them – confidentially, if you wish – to the UC Institutional Review

Board Chairperson at IRB@snhu.edu. If you would like to participate in this research project, or have any questions about the research,
please contact me at 603-775-8798, or at smcdonald@sau16.org.

Sincerely,

Steve McDonald

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form for "Teachers' Perceptions of Relational Trust, Leadership and Culture

In a New England Middle School"

Thank you for your interest and willingness to participate in this research study!

This research project will be conducted by Steve McDonald, who is a doctoral candidate at

Southern New Hampshire University. The study will examine teachers' perceptions of relational

trust, leadership, and culture in our school. As a participant in the study, you will be asked to

take part in an interview, which should take approximately one hour. You will be asked a series

of questions about your personal and professional experiences, as they relate to the topics of

relational trust, leadership, and culture in our organization. There are no foreseeable risks

associated with this study. The confidentiality of your participation will be ensured; your identity

or the name of your institution will not be shared.

You will not receive compensation for your participation, but the sharing of your story

may benefit other educational leaders when facilitating initiatives for change in schools.

Please understand that your participation is voluntary and that you have the right to withdraw

your consent, or discontinue participation, at any time with no penalty. You also have the right to

refuse to answer any question(s), for any reason, with no penalty. Please understand that

participation is NOT connected in any way to job responsibilities within the SAU. You are

invited only as a source of research for my personal doctoral program and your participation is

not in any way connected to my professional role within the SAU.

In addition, your individual confidentiality will be maintained in any or all publications or presentations resulting from this study. At the conclusion of the study all recorded data will be stored in a secure location. Written transcripts of the interviews will be stored in the researcher's Google drive. Only the researcher will have access to data for the study.

If you have any questions regarding this project, you may contact the researcher at smcdonald@sau16.org. If you have questions regarding your rights as research participant or any concerns regarding this project, you may report them – confidentially, if you wish – to the UC Institutional Review Board Chairperson at IRB@snhu.edu.

A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

I understand the above information and voluntarily consent to participate in the research.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

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