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Interorganizational Practices that Foster Reciprocal Trust Between Central Office Administrators and Principals

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I certify that I am the sole author of this dissertation. Any assistance received in the preparation of this dissertation has been acknowledged and disclosed within it. Any sources utilized, including the use of data, ideas and words, those quoted directly or paraphrased, have been cited. I certify that I have prepared this dissertation according program guidelines, as directed.

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ABSTRACT

Reciprocal trust among leaders in education improves the learning outcomes for students, which is the primary goal for educators. Researchers studying administrative teams have found the degree and level of reciprocal trust that exists in a learning organization between district-level leaders and principals can aid or impede the implementation of policies and initiatives. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the practices that develop reciprocal trust between principals and district-level school administrators.

This study was informed by semi-structured interviews with five principals who serve in K-8 schools. Participants identified communication, decision-making structures, relationships, and leadership styles as elements that impacted reciprocal trust. Principals interviewed value reciprocal trusting relationships with central office leaders and welcome opportunities to engage in building that trust. This study adds to the research indicating intentional communication, collaborative decision-making processes, a focus on building relationships, and self-reflection on leadership styles, cultivate an environment where reciprocal trust is established.

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Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the hierarchy of school district leadership, the dynamics of the leadership team can propel or impede the organization. Leadership teams that lack trusting relationships are not able build effective systems for innovation implementation (Lawson, Durand, Wilcox, Gregory, Schiller, and Zuckerman, 2017). In order to seek out the organizational norms that contribute to a leadership team where reciprocal trust is evident, I conducted a study investigating these principles and practices. The research presented is a qualitative study gathering principal perceptions of the collaborative leadership structures and practices that contributed to relationships where reciprocal trust was evident, thus increasing the potential for successful implementation of new initiatives. I collected and analyzed data related to communication practices, shared-decision making structures, and power structure perceptions in order to analyze principal insights into effective collaborative practices.

Background and Context

Studies focusing on the implementation of educational initiatives have indicated that in districts where reciprocal trust is evident between district office and building leaders, initiatives are more likely to succeed (Lawson, et al. 2017; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Similarly, successful reform efforts require the collaboration of these two groups to ensure coherence and alignment (Daly, Moolenaar, Liou, Tuytens, & del Fresno, 2015). However, leadership structures in school districts can vary greatly in terms of personnel, power structures, roles, responsibilities and decision-making processes. Understanding the intricacies of these systems is vital in schools, given that leadership ranks second behind teachers in factors contributing to student academic achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Principals

and district leaders both play an important role and demonstrate power relationships dependent on different decision areas (Xia, Shen, & Sun, 2019).

Therefore, in order to meet the growing demands of educational rigor and the needs of varying student populations in school districts, collaborative leadership structures must be effectively in place. Policy change in a collaborative approach is enacted when central office and building leaders learn from each other to successfully implement change (Burch & Spillane, 2004). Identifying effective collaborative practices can harness the power of trusting relationships among educational leaders that can improve the educational outcomes for students (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008).

Studies indicate various strategies that districts and school have implemented to build relationships including opportunities for increased collaboration (Daly & Finnigan, 2011) , fostering learning partnerships (Honig, 2012), enhancing communication (Durand, Lawson, Wilcox, & Schiller, 2016), and distributing leadership (Spillane, 2005). These approaches were explored with participants to determine principal perceptions on the effectiveness of such approaches in practice.

In my study, I investigated the lived experience of reciprocal trust relationships as described by K-8 school principals. Reciprocal trust is defined as interorganizational or "cross-boundary relations between school leaders and district central office leaders" (Lawson et al., 2017). Reciprocal trust is different from relational trust, which does not take into account the power dynamics of those working at different levels in an organization. School-level leaders, for the purpose of this work, are principals. District-level leaders are those working in a central office capacity or in district level positions including directors, assistant superintendents and superintendents.

To make this argument, I draw upon theories and concepts of reciprocal trust, social networks, distributed leadership, and in particular, the work of Lawson, Honig, Leithwood, Daly, and Spillane. Much of the work finds that in districts where reciprocal trust is evident, school improvement initiatives flourish and student-learning data indicates greater growth. The work I outline here and research I engaged in fills an important gap by examining the actual practices employed in school districts to develop and nurture productive relationships between principals and district-level leaders as they are perceived by principals.

Problem Statement

District-level leaders, play an important role in determining the educational outcomes of students (Leithwood and Azah, 2017). "Current reform efforts increasingly rely on collaboration of district and site leaders to support alignment and coherence of the reform in multiple settings" (Daly, et. al, 2015). In districts where reciprocal trust is evident, policy implementation initiatives flourish and student-learning data shows greater growth (Lawson, et. al, 2017).

However, the roles and connectedness of district-level leaders to building-level leaders can be inconsistent from one district to the next. Given the significant role reciprocal trust plays in the implementation of initiatives to advance learning, further investigation of the actual practices and conditions that facilitate the development of reciprocal trusting relationships is needed. While the advancement of student learning is a common goal for district and building level leaders, mechanisms to attain this goal must be examined more closely to better understand how they can be replicated.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the perceptions of principals regarding the effectiveness of practices contributing to the development of reciprocal trust between principals and district-level school administrators. Reciprocal trust among educational leaders improves the learning outcomes for students, which is the primary goal for educators. In reviewing the literature on this topic, the effective reciprocal trust building and collaborative practices are generally defined as tools used for communication, relationship building and decision-making practices. Additionally, it is important to have an understanding of the social networks and social capital that exist in school districts. These networks and conditions for the exchange of resources can be indicators of trusting relationships.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following overarching research questions:

What practices do principals perceive as contributing to the development of reciprocal trust between principals and district-level leaders?

What tools for communication and decision-making structures contribute to effective collaboration between principals and district level leaders?

What is the lived experience of communication and relational linkages within the context of a reform initiative?

Overview of Research Design

The methodology chosen for this study is phenomenology. Phenomenology lends itself to the purpose of this study as I was seeking to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of principals. Interviewing as the primary data collection method provided the opportunity to explore these concepts in an in-depth manner with participants. I engaged participants in semi-

structured interviews to identify themes in the elements of building reciprocal trust through collaborative leadership, and communication structures that have contributed to successful implementation of initiatives.

This study was designed to elicit a detailed description of the lived experience of each principal. Additionally it provided the opportunity to examine individual experiences alongside others to find themes in light of the conceptual framework and literature reviewed pertaining to the research topic. Opportunities for member checking were provided throughout the data collection and analysis processes to ensure participant experiences are accurately represented.

Rationale & Significance

This qualitative study is needed for a number of reasons. First, in reviewing the literature, a gap exists in the research on reciprocal trust between principals and central office administrators in school districts. Current literature recognizes the importance of trust in initiative implementation but does not identify the practices school districts engage in to build and maintain that trust as perceived by principals. Second, most studies investigating trust in school districts focus on principal- teacher trust and not the relationship between central office administrators and principals. Given the greater focus on instructional leadership for both of these levels of leaders, attention is needed in this area. Third, this study provides information and key insights into practices that school districts can adopt in order to build and maintain reciprocal trust with building principals.

In exploring these concepts and questions, I identified common themes principals cite as contributing to effective collaborative leadership structures and practices in school districts. An effective leadership structure will have a positive impact on student learning, which is the primary responsibility of a school district. Examining tools for communication, power

dynamics, decision-making processes, and role definitions among staff provides insights into the practices in the field that contribute to existing collaboration structures.

Role of Researcher & Researcher Assumptions

I identify as a 42-year-old, white female who has served in a variety of roles in the field of education for the past 20 years. I have worked in the contexts of suburban school districts located south and west of the city of Chicago. Relevant to this research are my experiences in serving as an Assistant Superintendent in a southwest suburb of Chicago in Cook County for 10 years. In that role, I oversaw the programs for English learners, the Preschool for All Program, teacher evaluation, and several other districtwide initiatives and programs. In my current role as a principal in a different district, I have become aware of variances in the interactions and relationships between principals and district-office personnel. My assumptions entering into this research included the belief that creating a collaborative trusting relationship between these two entities takes effort, that power dynamics can impact relationships and that all parties are typically greatly invested in helping students learn.

An awareness of the hierarchy of district leadership and the research done on the role of the school principal has led me to more closely examine the relationship between district and school level leaders. District-level leaders play an important role in the change process as well. As a former district-level leader, I worked to contribute a collaborative climate in working with principals. Subsequently, I was intentional in building trusting relationships with principals.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In schools, leadership ranks second behind teachers in factors contributing to student academic achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Principals and central office administrators both play an important role and demonstrate power relationships dependent on different decision areas (Xia, Shen, & Sun, 2019). Studies focusing on the implementation of educational initiatives have indicated that in districts where reciprocal trust is evident between district office and building leaders, initiatives are more likely to succeed (Lawson, et al. 2017; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Another important aspect in the successful implementation of new initiatives found by Burch and Spillane (2004) is a collaborative approach when central office and building leaders learn from each other. Thus, successful reform efforts require the collaboration of these two groups to ensure coherence and alignment (Daly et al. 2015).

However, leadership structures in school districts can vary greatly in terms of personnel, power structures, roles, responsibilities and decision-making processes. Identifying effective collaborative practices can harness the power of trusting relationships among educational leaders that can improve the educational outcomes for students (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008). Researched strategies that districts and schools have frequently implemented to build reciprocal trust include opportunities for increased collaboration (Daly & Finnigan, 2011), fostering learning partnerships (Honig, 2012), enhancing reciprocal communication (Durand, Lawson, Wilcox, & Schiller, 2016), and distributing leadership (Spillane, 2005).

This literature review will examine factors that influence the development of reciprocal trust between central office administrators and principals. In what follows, the roles and impact of principals and central office administrators in school districts are addressed. Next, is the

consideration of how others have defined and researched reciprocal and relational trust. Then, shared leadership and communication are reviewed as strong factors in developing reciprocal trust in organizations. Finally, this paper explores the literature focused on social network theory and social capital theory as it relates to organizational trust. The literature presented will demonstrate the need for further examination of actual practices that principals perceive as contributing to the development of reciprocal trust in a learning organization.

The Principal- Central Office Relationship

This section will discuss the role of the principal and central office leaders in school districts. Relevant research addressed will explore different aspects of the relationships between the two roles. Finally, research contending the essential elements required of central office leaders in initiating a collaborative approach to districtwide improvement will be examined.

Principal Leadership

The role of the principal continues to evolve. In their work focusing on principal leadership, the Wallace Foundation (2013) noted that principals "can no longer function simply as building managers, tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations and avoiding mistakes. They have to be (or become) leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction" (p. 6). To address this shift, 1996, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards placed student learning as the main focus for school administrators thus formalizing a principal's role in teaching in learning. The Wallace Foundation (2013) similarly identified the multitude of areas that principals need to hone in their study. They recognized the practices of "shaping a vision of academic success for all students, creating a climate hospitable to education, cultivating leadership in others, improving instruction, and managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement" (p. 6).

In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) published a revised edition called the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). The update addressed increasing demands in schools and considered recent empirical research regarding the components that make educational leaders successful (NPBEA, 2015). The PSEL address ten areas to guide professional practice with a greater emphasis on students and student learning while addressing the increasing demands for a successful leader. Effectively and dynamically executing these added components of instructional leadership has a significant impact on student achievement (Salo, Nylund, & Stjernstrøm, 2015).

Notable to the focus of this literature review is the inclusion of a direct reference to system relationships in Standard 9: Operations and Management stating, "Effective leaders develop and manage productive relationships with the central office and school board" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 17). Thus, the PSEL confirms the importance of building and sustaining these relationships as a contributing factor in effective leadership practices. However, there is no explicit language indicating the responsibility of the central office leaders in maintaining a productive relationship with principals.

While national standards recognize the importance of these relationships, state standards, which dictate how principals are evaluated, do not identify their importance. In Illinois, for example, the criteria and areas of focus for the role of the principal are found in the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders. The Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders are based on the ISLLC standards and identify six areas of principal performance essential to leading a successful school. These include living a mission and vision focused on results, leading and managing systems change, improving teaching and learning, building and

maintaining collaborative relationships, leading with integrity and professionalism, and creating a culture of high expectations (Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders, 2008).

Among the Illinois Performance Standards, Standard 4: building and maintaining collaborative relationships, requires that principals develop "school-wide capacity to establish trusting relationships and supports positive relationships among and between all stakeholder groups" (Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders, 2008, p.10). Interestingly, they do not explicitly cite developing a collaborative relationship with central office; however, central office administrators are a key stakeholder group in a school district. This is notable given that the principal is the hub of communication between district-office leaders and school personnel (Moolenaar & Sleegers, 2015).

More closely aligned with the standard on building and maintaining relationships, is research affirming the relationship between a collaborative school community and success in the implantation of new initiatives. Studies suggest that principals who are more efficient in connecting with teachers report a more innovative school climate (Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2010). Moreover, school or building-level leadership is integral in implementing instructional coherence during reforms, indicating that building-level leaders should be involved in the decision-making regarding such changes (Coburn & Russell, 2008).

The role of the principal is dynamic and key to building culture and the implementation of systematic change. Typically, in a multi-building district, alignment of many of the elements of the standards for principals is expected under the direction of central office administrators. Honoring the various requirements of the position and ensuring a collaborative relationship with central office leaders is key to the success in cohesive implementation of districtwide initiatives.

Central Office Leadership

In addition to principals, the other main group of educational leaders in a school district is the central office leaders. For the purpose of this paper, central office leaders will include the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendents and Program Directors. This group includes Assistant Superintendents or Directors of Human Resources, Special Education, and Curriculum. Titles may vary depending on the district. Structures in school districts vary widely in their titles and responsibilities in these roles. Research discussed in this section will outline central office leadership roles in guiding the direction of the district.

At the top of the hierarchy in the network of district employees, central office leaders, play an important role in determining the educational outcomes of students. (Leithwood and Azah, 2017). Research has contended that Central Office program directors have a significant impact on the implementation of reform policies (Burch & Spillane, 2004). Trujillo (2013) supports this result citing the impact of districts on student testing outcomes with the capabilities of aligning curriculum and resources on a large scale.

The roles of central office administrators are evolving in the same direction as the role of the principal in focusing on teaching and learning (Honig, Venkateswaran, & McNeil, 2017). Just as the role of the principal is changing from managerial to that of an instructional leader, Honig, et al. (2017) discuss the imperative move of central office administrators to use research to shift from daily duties as compliance monitors to a more integral role in developing the skills of principals as instructional leaders. One such study by Trujillo (2013) indicates that district effectiveness required district leadership to promote and advance strong instructional leadership.

District leaders rely on building leaders to translate policies and resources into action (Leithwood and Azah, 2017). To achieve coherence in this implementation, district leaders must master the strategies of bridging and buffering (Honig & Hatch, 2004). An illustration of this was the study by Durand, Lawson, Wilcox, & Schiller (2016) finding successful district leaders engage in bridging, brokering, and buffering strategies when implementing initiatives. Bridging involves connecting with the educational environment through boundary crossing activities and communication, to meet system goals (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Honig & Hatch, 2004). This boundary crossing indicates a move to connect through hierarchical power structures. Buffering in this case is a means to protect building level leaders from external pressures and priorities to achieve goals and limit demands. (Honig & Hatch, 2004). In their work, Honig and Hatch (2004) cite demands on principals including federal and state mandates, community pressure, unions, and school boards that central office administrators should help manage. Support with external pressures enables principals to focus on school goals and strategy setting (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

However, there can be a disconnect between what is needed at the building level and what supports are provided. An example of discrepancies that can exist between what central office staff thinks it is providing and what principals perceived and needed for improvement efforts are found in Mania-Singer's 2017 study. Her study indicated that while central office leaders thought they were providing opportunities for feedback and substantial emphasis on data-based decision making, principals perceived feedback opportunities to be irregular and informal and data training insufficient (Mania-Singer, 2017). This discrepancy of perception ultimately hindered transformation efforts (Mania-Singer, 2017).

Central Office Administrators and Districtwide Improvement

There is rarely evidence of districtwide improvement in teaching and learning without central office leaders engaging in building capacity (Honig, et al., 2010). For school district transformation to occur, the following need to be in place: learning-focused partnerships with principals; assistance to the partnerships; reorganizing and re-culturing central office teams to support these partnerships; executive leadership providing instructional leadership; and the use of evidence to support improvement (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). With these responsibilities, system leaders are charged with developing and maintaining productive relationships between and among all stakeholder groups, including building leaders (Honig, 2012; Daly et al., 2015). Thus, leadership centered on student learning and instructional improvement, and the district leaders modeling a 'leaders as learners' approach is required to increase levels of student learning (Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Thus, the literature shows that when working together toward the goal of instructional improvement at both leadership levels, student outcomes improve.

An example of this shift to collaborative leadership is the study by Mombourquette and Bedard (2014), in which principals found the change in culture with district-level leaders working directly with staff in schools as the new norm. Principals understood that the main focus of central office leadership was to support the work of enhancing student learning in schools. An illustration of this is the study by Adams (2016) that focused on the implementation of a collaborative inquiry model of instructional leadership development. Adams found that central office leaders can impact learning through frequent time spent at schools focusing on learning, collaboration, and communication (Adams, 2016). Daly et al. (2015) similarly found that district offices are essential in supporting an innovative climate. The significance as it

pertains to this work is that principals indicated less difficult relationships with district leaders when they perceived the district office to be more innovative (Daly et al., 2015).

The research discussed in this section suggests that the roles of principals and central office leaders are shifting to focus on instructional leadership. When this work is executed with a collaborative approach between the two groups, there is a positive impact on student learning and achievement. As student learning is the central purpose of schools, this shift is a significant one.

Distributed Leadership

In reviewing frameworks for understanding leadership practices in systems with a hierarchy of leadership, the tenants of distributed leadership could be aptly applied. Distributed leadership is a framework that takes into account power relationships and is relevant to the decision-making dynamic between district and school leaders. Supovitz et.al, (2019) define distributed leadership as "a lens to understand the range of leadership activities which contribute to the fulfilling of the organization's mission" (p.15). The distributed leadership perspective defines leadership practice as the "interactions between people and their situation" (Spillane 2005, p. 144). Others describe distributed leadership in terms of task delegation by the titled leader or the establishment of a leadership team within an organization. While typically utilized to refer to principal and teacher dynamics by Supovitz, D'Auria, Spillane (2019) and others, this perspective could apply to district and school leaders as well. Zuckerman et al. (2017) examined the role of distributed leadership in policy change implementation. Policy changes included in their study included the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, a new teacher evaluation system and an initiative titled Data-Driven Instruction (DDI). The data indicated that in odds-beating schools, trusting relationships, collective goal setting, instructional feedback, and

collective guided learning enabled performance adaptation. (Zuckerman et al., 2017). Odds-beating districts are those in which student achievement data indicates they are performing significantly beyond expectation (Leithwood, 2013). The elements studied by Zuckerman et al. (2017) are similar to the components Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton (2010) found essential to district transformation addressed above.

Additionally, district leaders need to garner buy-in from all stakeholders before implementation of initiatives (Tichnor-Wagner, 2019). In her study, Tichnor-Wagner (2019) found when a district gave all stakeholders voice and choice in the reform process, there was a greater level of buy-in. Thus, developing goals through a collaborative process, similar to those in the distributed leadership framework, among district and school leaders leads to a shared purpose (Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014).

Maintaining shared decision-making processes during the implementation of any initiative is equally important. Adaptive leaders realize that those in district leadership roles may not know all that is necessary to address complex change (Durand et al., 2016). It is therefore essential to enlist the support and collective knowledge of the organization. Throughout the shared goal implementation process, flexibility and focusing on individual building needs was an additional indicator of successful building and district leader relationships (Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014). The districts Mombourquette and Bedard (2014) studied, engaged in re-culturing through the change process to increase collective discussions on teaching and learning and building their collective capacity in evidence-based decision-making. Their research emphasized the importance of prioritizing ongoing conversations about working together and using data to inform decisions. Principals in this study indicated that ongoing dialogue between district and school leaders was essential in creating the alignment of practices around student learning.

Psychological safety, trust, and a culture of mutual learning are three essential conditions to foster distributed leadership (Supovitz et al., 2019). Psychological safety provides that the sharing of vulnerabilities, mistakes, disagreements and opportunities to challenge thinking regardless of position are acceptable in an organization (Edmondson, 2012). While the relational trust deemed by Supovitz et al. is explored more in the following section, they also add the importance of that trust in how it influences communications and opportunities for two-way feedback.

Many of the tenets of distributed leadership were utilized in a study examining the implementation of new processes by a district to develop school leadership. Adams (2016) found that a collaborative inquiry model for the development of instructional leadership led to an increase in collaboration, reflection, communication, trust and improved student learning. Thus, the outcomes of her work directly relate to the skills modeled by the district leadership team. The work also supports the practices that increase trust and communication including having district leaders incorporate frequent visits to schools and provide enhanced communication and opportunities for collaboration.

While the framework for distributed leadership is typically applied in a school setting, the research in this section indicates applying some of the tenets of distributed leadership to the central office could have positive results. Changes to the relationship between the district and building leader relationships include increasing collaboration, shared decision-making processes, and collective goal setting and learning. Accordingly, the research cited in this section demonstrates that formalizing the implementation of the tenets of distributed leadership to the central office leader and principal dynamic, could help districts realize positive results.

Trust

This section will discuss the topic of trust and delineate relational trust and reciprocal trust. Research addressed will highlight the importance of the role of trust in advancing the work of a school district. Moreover, trust in vertical power relationships will be addressed along with examples of how organizations engage in trust building.

In *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything* (2008), Stephen Covey stated, "The number one job of any leader is to inspire trust. It's to release the creativity and capacity of individuals to be their best and to create a high-trust environment in which they can effectively work with others" (p. 298). Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2000) identify the five elements of trust as an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable because of their confidence in the benevolence, reliability, honesty, openness, and competency of the other party. Trust is critical for engaging in challenging conversations and for individuals to acknowledge what they do not know in order to learn and grow (Rincon-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Thus, it is imperative that trusting relationships exist in any learning organization.

In exploring negative relationships between principals and central office leaders, Daly et al. (2015) found that administrators who perceive limited trust in a school district identify more relationships that are difficult with other leaders. An additional finding in their study was the indication of difficult relationships when there was not a match in perceptions of trust by leaders and reciprocity (Daly et al., 2015). In other words, when one leader perceived more trust in the organization than the other, both indicated a difficult relationship with the other. Furthermore, principals identified greater trust and positive relationships when they viewed individuals in central office roles to be more innovative however, those in central office roles are overall more likely to be under greater scrutiny and be targets for a lack of trust (Daly et al., 2015).

Relational & Reciprocal Trust

In their review of the literature for their study on the role of trust in implementing innovative policies, Lawson, Durand, Wilcox, Gregory, Schiller, & Zuckerman (2017) identified the importance of relational trust as an intraorganizational resource. Bryk & Schneider (2003) define relational trust as a form of trust founded on effective social relationships between stakeholder groups. High levels of trust in schools lead to an increase in supportive relationships with colleagues seeking feedback and support with concerns, thus honing opportunities for growth (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

However, the concept of relational trust does not characterize the type of trust required of vertical relationships. Vertical relationships are those that cross the boundaries of the hierarchy of leadership and decision-making power levels. Lawson's team found the need to identify a concept for trusting relationships that cross the boundaries in the hierarchy of school organizations (Lawson et al. 2017). Lawson et al. (2017) sought to explore the impact of trust on relationships framed by boundary theory (Akkerman & Bakker, 2012) where power and authority influence relationships.

As a result, Lawson and his colleagues defined the concept of reciprocal trust to capture the impact of these hierarchical leadership relationships. This type of trust defines the relationship between the building level leader and the central office leader. Reciprocal trust is defined as interorganizational or "socially constructed and constituted, cross-boundary relations between school leaders and district central office leaders" (Lawson, et al., 2017, p. 18). This study found that in districts where reciprocal trust is evident, initiatives flourish and student-learning data indicates greater growth.

> Relational trust and reciprocal trust, together with their respective communications patterns, open avenues to understanding the character of social exchanges and interpersonal relationships in two different organizations: a school and district office. Our research also emphasizes the importance of interorganizational, cross-boundary, and inter-role relationships (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), especially during turbulent times accompanying the implementation of simultaneous and multiple innovations in entire families of schools comprising identifiable districts. (Lawson et al., 2017, p. 30)

Lawson et al. (2017) found evidence of the concept of reciprocal trust and communication between district and school leaders as well as district leaders and teachers in schools with higher than typical academic achievement data. Similarly, in districts successful with improving the learning of their students, Leithwood (2013) found that district leaders reported that their relationships with principals were collaborative or reciprocal and viewed themselves as easily accessible. When district leaders are present in buildings and available, principals report less of a 'hierarchical' structure with more informal opportunities to collaborate (Momobourquette & Bedard, 2014).

"The type, quality and structure of relationships matter to a collective effort to improve." (Finnigan and Daly, 2012, p.45) In odds-beating school districts, district leaders prioritized relationship building with school principals while implementing reform (Durand et al., 2016). Structures and norms for regular and reciprocal conversations regarding organizational progress are part of effective improvement process design (Leithwood, et al., 2019). Central office leaders and principals need to prioritize setting aside time regularly to discuss the status of strategies employed to reach school goals.

In her study on the role of central office in school-improvement, Mania-Singer (2017) found that there was a higher rate of principals seeking information from central office leaders than the reverse and little feedback provided to central office from principal. Communication in terms of feedback was therefore one-way. Additionally, data from the study by Mania-Singer (2017) indicated few relationships existed between central office leaders and principals in the areas of best practice, data, decision-making, communication, professional growth, personal issues or social interactions. In order to be considered a strong reciprocal relationship, an equal rate of information seeking needs to occur. Central office administrators and principals would seek input from the other equally.

Given the importance of reciprocal relationships, a study by Daly, Liou and Brown (2016) calls for attention to be paid to the energy affective ties in school district leadership teams. The study examined energy ties in which the two people involved in an interaction leave feeling more positive and motivated. The study by Daly, et al. (2016) identified the need the development of an innovative culture. They found that in school districts with more innovative cultures, positive energy ties were more frequent and school leadership teams were more effective. In districts where trust, risk-taking and interaction are prioritized, social capital and relationships are stronger and improve outcomes (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007). When reciprocal trust is apparent in an organization, information is sought equally in a cross-boundary flow focusing on both personal and instructional matters. The reverse is also evident as Supovitz et al. (2019) found that when sufficient trust is not evident, improvement efforts and culture of risk-taking to improve outcomes stall and fail.

Communication Between Principals and Central Office Administrators

Lawson, Durand, Wilcox, Gregory, Schiller, & Zuckerman (2017) identified a need for reciprocal trust between central office leaders and principals, emphasizing the importance of the trust-communication connection in implementing successful reform initiatives. Communication between district leaders builds trust and in return trust aids communication (Durand et al., 2016). The interconnectivity of trust and communication require communication mechanisms between central office leaders and principals to be developed collaboratively and with intentionality.

Greater attempts are required at the district level to engage in frequent formal communication and the exchange of ideas to increase improvement efforts (Kowalski, 2006). Chen and Reigeluth (2010) also note the importance of building in opportunities for informal communication to facilitate the effectiveness of the formal or more difficult conversations. In engaging in successful reform efforts, proactive and adaptive district leaders establish system-wide communication mechanisms necessary to facilitate the change. Particularly imperative in these efforts is district leaders initiating communication with school leaders (Durand et al., 2016).

Formalizing communication systems requires increased opportunities for feedback from schools to district office and the reverse (Mania- Singer, 2017). "Regular formal and informal meetings with school leaders for the purposes of goal setting, curriculum and instructional development, vision alignment, and professional development" were apparent in odds-beating school districts implementing reform (Durand, et al., 2016, p. 58). In researching the result of these increased opportunities for communication, Leithwood and Azah (2017) found principals indicated satisfaction with communication when structures for face-to-face communication occurred among principals and between principals and district leaders.

Similarly, Mombourquette and Bedard (2014) found that when district leaders spent more time in schools engaging in informal conversations with principals, principals reported an increase in direct problem-solving conversations. In their study focusing on principal's perspectives on helpful district leadership practices, Mombourquette and Bedard found that when principals and central office leaders met regularly at central office and informally in buildings, principals noted a more collegial rather than hierarchical structure. As collective discussions on improving student learning increased, a more collaborative approach to decision-making developed.

Increasing informal and formal communication opportunities is one identified method for developing reciprocal trust. However, ensuring these conversations lend themselves to the development of reciprocal trust requires that they maintain a balanced communication where input is valued from both perspectives. Linjuan Men (2014) identified the importance of two-way communication channels in ensuring a balanced system. "Face-to-face interactions, such as manager-follower one-on-one, employee general meetings, and phone communications, which arguably facilitate listening, instant feedback, and conversation, were found to additionally promote the organization's symmetrical communication" (Men, 2014, p. 276-278). Men (2014) found that the outcomes of implementing these practices demonstrating a responsiveness and care for the needs of employees provided a greater level of employee relational satisfaction.

In examining the precise elements of communication in this context, Raelin (2016) examined the dialogic conditions in communication in determining the level of collaborative agency in an organization. Dialogic conditions refer to the observable behaviors including individuals speaking freely, listening intently, challenging the values of the organization and an apparent diversity in points of view expressed (Raelin, 2016). These dialogic conditions

facilitate the development of reciprocal trust and thus further the positive impact of a shared or collaborative leadership structure.

Research reviewed in this section demonstrates the importance of communication in building trusting relationships. Effective approaches to ensuring the development of communication channels include creating regular opportunities for formal as well as informal conversations. Also important in communication is ensuring the dialogic conditions are such that both central office administrators and principals are able to freely express ideas and viewpoints that will enable the organization to progress.

Social Network Theory

In examining interorganizational trust and communication patterns, it is important to understand the intricacies of the social networks within an organization. Social networks are what many researchers examine as they seek to understand relationships within an organization and more recently, school organizations (Liou, Daly, Brown, and del Fresno2015; Daly and Finnigan, 2011). Social-network theory examines patterns of social ties in networks (Cross et al. 2002). Network studies suggest that the social position in a system can influence the flow of information and the use of resources (Spillane & Kim, 2012). Therefore, leaders in an organization with more and stronger ties, have the greatest access to resources. Ultimately, a leader's position in such a network can enhance or hinder leadership efforts and the effective implementation of initiatives (Mooleaner, et al. 2010).

Additionally, dense prosocial networks increase productivity, innovation, and organizational functioning (Daly et al. 2014). This can be applied to networks within a school as well as districtwide networks. Studies suggest principals who are more efficient in connecting with teachers report a more innovative school climate (Mooleaner et al., 2010). Likewise,

intentional partnerships and strong relationships among central office and school administrators are essential to responding to accountability policies (Daly and Finnigan, 2011).

In networking, not only is having a social tie important, but also the degree of reciprocity in ties between actors can indicate a stronger relationship (Liou et al., 2015). The degree of strength of the ties impacts the speed and magnitude of change initiatives. (Liou et al., 2015). This supports the previously cited research demonstrating the importance of reciprocal trust in the implementation of educational initiatives.

Important in generating strong networks is building the collective efficacy and shared purpose. Greater than extrinsic accountability, teams with commitments to a common moral purpose and each other demonstrate intrinsically motivated accountability (Fullan et al., 2015). These commitments are similar to those of the distributed leadership framework. As Zuckerman et al. (2017) found, trusting relationships, collective goal setting, instructional feedback, and collective guided learning enabled performance adaptation. Thus, change initiatives with a strong social-network throughout an organization have a greater likelihood of success.

Social Capital Theory

While social-network theory examines the strength of the network social ties, social capital theory postulates that social relationships permit access to resources that can be utilized to attain goals (Burt, 2000). Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) define social capital as "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit. Social capital thus comprises both the network and the assets that may be mobilized through that network" (p. 243). Learning organizations with stronger social capital, are thus better positioned to achieve objectives. Resources are able to move through the system to target needs in an expedited manner.

When implementing accountability policies, focusing on the social aspects may be as important as the technical aspects of reform (Daly et al., 2015). In studying the social capital of school districts, Hooge, Moolenaar, van Look, Janssen, & Sleegers found that when the intervention provided by district leaders was support, the more all leaders were turned to for advice (2019). This support may take the form of encouraging and empowering principals while providing coaching, consultation or training. Additionally, personal conversations and advice were sought when district leaders were perceived to implement goal directed interventions in a supportive manner, thus increasing social capital districtwide (Hooge, et al., 2019). The results of the approach taken by central office leaders generated the types and qualities of communication that result in building trust within the organization.

Thus, social capital strategy involves building individual and collective efficacy while creating links between team members to drive organizational improvement (Fullan, Rincón-Gallardo, & Hargreaves, 2015). These links bind the team together and ultimately result in a shared purpose as the foundation of the organization. Conversely, as important as it is to look at the tenants of building strong and pro-social ties, it is equally important to understand the antecedents of difficult relationships, ensuring that perceptions of trust and innovation are aligned (Daly et al., 2015).

Conclusion

In this review of the literature, I have explored the impact and relationships of central office and principal leadership, the concepts of reciprocal and relational trust, shared leadership, communication, and social capital and social-network theories. Elements that contribute to the success of change initiatives pertaining to the relationships of school leaders were identified and

discussed. The literature asserts that in order to increase positive learning outcomes for students in our schools through change initiatives, a focus on the relationships between building and district leaders is imperative in advancing the work. Thus, it is critical to further examine the actual practices employed by districts that principals perceive as contributing to reciprocal trust in order to help move a school district organization forward.

Theoretical Lens/Conceptual Framework

Social Constructivism

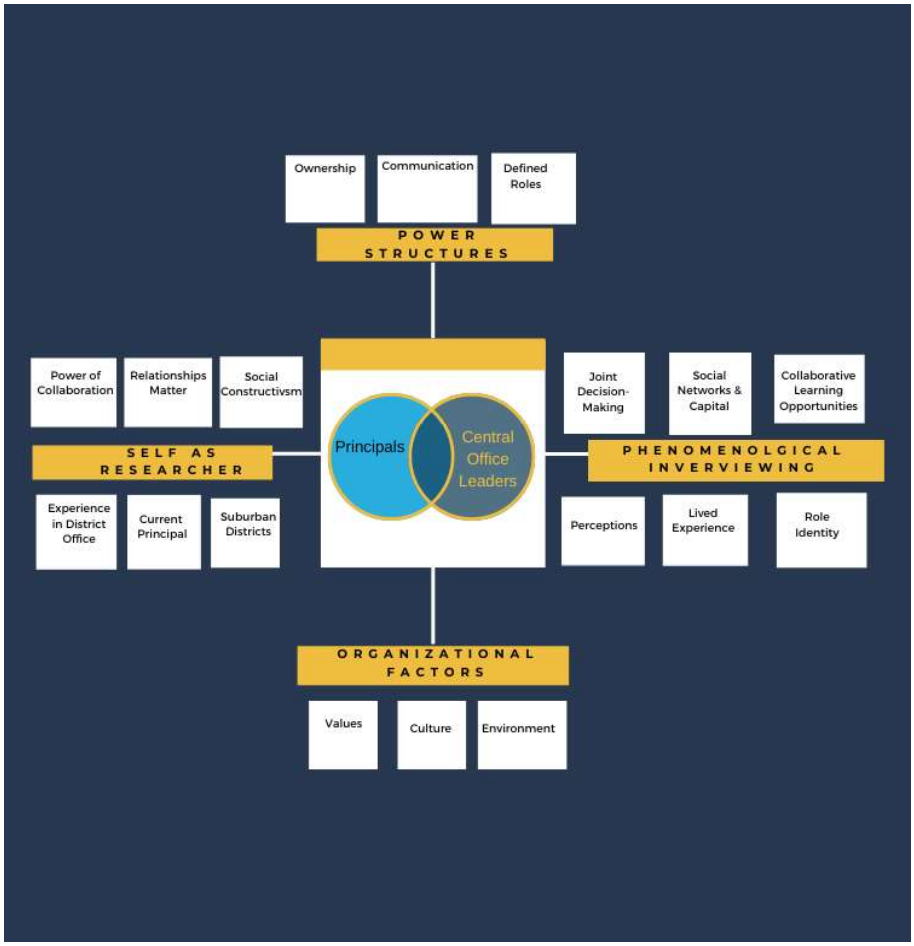
Central to examining practices that foster reciprocal trust are constructivist theories. The basic belief of constructivists is that reality is constructed through interactions. Reality is therefore not absolute and only exists because of the reality created by the individual. "Truth and meaning do not exist in some external world, but are created by the subject's interactions with the world" (Gray, 2014, p. 20). Thus, there can be multiple accounts of the same events and interactions based on the meaning gleaned by different individuals.

Research methodology of constructivism aims to find consensus among different constructions through refining the realities of the individuals and then utilizing a dialectic approach to find commonalities and differences. Paul (2005) explains that this dialectic approach seeks to transform the minds of the participants and not reality, since reality is in the minds of those who construct it. In this study, I am seeking to discover the truths of principal leaders who all have experience working in school districts as well as their perceptions of the collaborative practices that exist in their districts. I will be looking to record the perceptions and meanings that each principal has constructed through their experiences and engage in discussion to refine my understanding of their realities.

In examining school district culture defining these roles, I believe that "Knowledge is understood within the context of the culture and is negotiated through a democratic process that respects all views" (Paul, 2005, p. 46). This is particularly important in the topic I have chosen since the view of the participants could vary widely and not fit in with the accepted views of leadership roles in our society. The views of others may also not fit with my views with the perspectives I have from working in a district-level position and as a principal. Figure 1 outlines personal experiences in relation to the research topic through a conceptual framework.

Central also is the idea that power, like in the paradigm of critical perspective is important with ethics. "Inquiry should tie its conclusions to values and include measures to eliminate power imbalances" (Paul, 2005, p. 46). This will require me to check my personal beliefs and values during the interview and data analysis process to ensure the thoughts conveyed by research participants are accurate. Similarly, I will need to check my biases with the research at hand to allow for a balanced interpretation of the information.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework detailing elements relevant to this research study.



Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction and Overview

The methodology chosen for this research study is phenomenology. The focus of the study aligns well with the complexity of the recursive and dynamic data collection process inherent in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Phenomenology lends itself to the purpose of my study as it emphasizes the researcher understanding the participants' perceptions of their worlds and how they make sense of the world (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Moreover, as phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of the lived experiences of others, it is an appropriate methodology for this study. As I work to understand the perceptions of the lived experience of principals, I sought out common themes to help identify universal effective practices that they have encountered in working with central office administrators. The rationale for this research design is detailed in figure 2.

I engaged in one-on-one interviews with five principals. Participants were chosen through group characteristic sampling. Characteristics included serving as a principal for five or more years in the grade level ranges of Kindergarten through 8th grade. In line with the methodology of phenomenology, I used open or selective coding and engaged in collective thematic analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Themes helped inform data analysis and conclusions to further understand the essence of the experiences of participants.

Figure 2: Rationale for Research Design

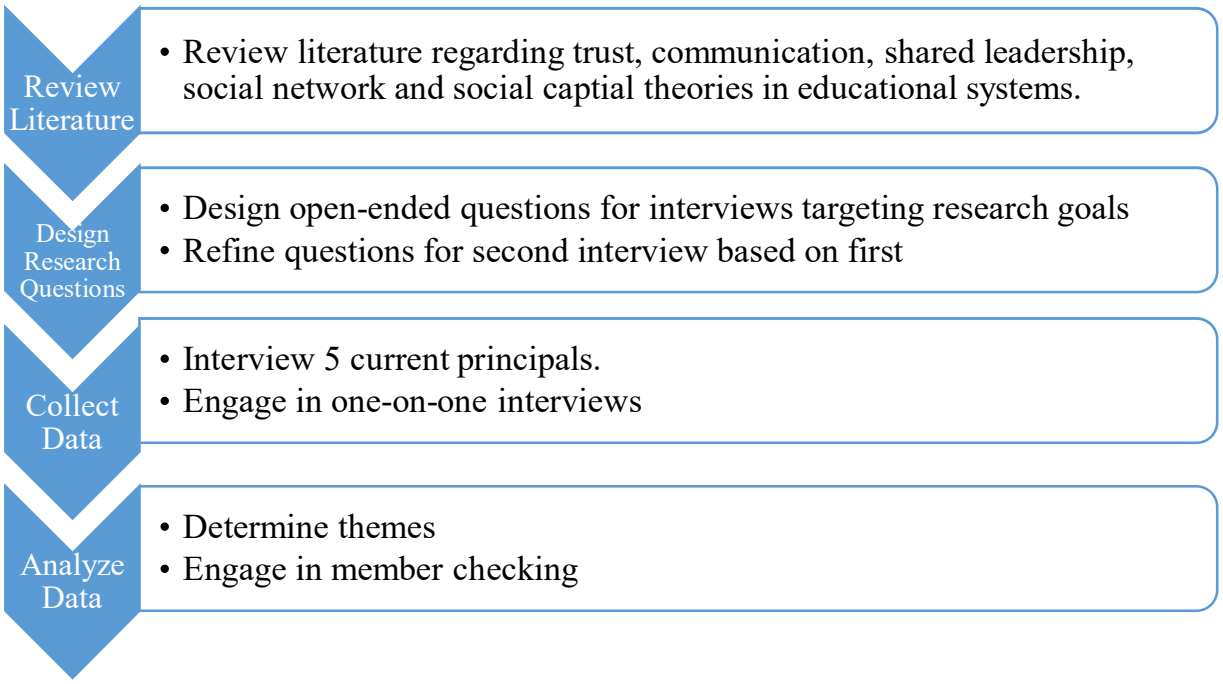


Figure 2. Outlined process for engaging in the phenomenological research process.

Research Participants and Sources of Data

Research participants included five principals from the south and western suburbs of Chicago. In terms of purposeful sampling, my goal in this study was to understand the context-rich perspectives of the group I had chosen (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The group sampling strategy I chose is group characteristics sampling. I interviewed principals who have served in their roles for at least five years. The focus for this study was on principals with experience from Kindergarten through eighth grade. All principal participants were from the Chicagoland suburbs. As Ravitch and Carl (2016) describe the purpose for this sampling strategy, I aimed to

elicit information that could form patterns. The interview transcripts provided the data for this study.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection method used for this research was through an in-depth interview with each research subject. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. The chosen method of interviewing is in line with the methodology of phenomenology as I sought out in-depth interviews with principals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019).

Given the experiences I have had in this field, phenomenological interviewing allows for a focus on a researcher's personal experiences in combination with research participants. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Together we sought to understand the deep lived meanings that constitute the essence of the experiences in building and maintaining reciprocal trust between principals and central office administrators. It therefore becomes a hermeneutical or interpretive process (Mills and Birks, 2014).

Data Analysis Methods

In analyzing the data from interviews, during my initial read-throughs, I took notes of categories I identified in creating the questions, as well as categories created in reflecting on the conversation. I searched for "processes, actions, and interactions" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This allowed me to create an initial correlating coding system. After identifying language in the conversation to be coded and applying a concrete coding system (Madison, 2011), I could discern whether or not my coding system was operational and made adjustments as needed. After adjustments were made, finalized codes were detailed and defined using a codebook (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Organizing codes and examining for themes resulted in initial interpretations. I then created a representation of the data collected. The purpose was to ultimately describe the phenomenon apart from any previously held assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2019). Additionally, true to the nature of the methodology I have chosen, I spent additional time "engaging participants in the data analysis" after each interview throughout the data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 182).

Ethical Considerations

This research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before interviews began. Given that this research involved human subjects, every effort was made to ensure any risks and protections were outlined explicitly in the IRB process. Participants had the opportunity to determine whether or not the risks identified are work taking to further research in this area (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I ensured all research subjects signed informed consent forms.

To ensure that the study is considered ethical, anonymity of participants has been maintained throughout the process. I did not include any identifying information and ensured the study cannot be linked to participants' identities (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Once transcribed, participants were each coded with a letter. Additionally, I ensured the privacy of research participants by keeping information collected confidential. All of the interview notes and files were kept in computer files that are protected by passwords known only to the researcher. I removed the direct identifiers, like name or record number, from participant information and replaced it with a random letter that cannot be linked back to the participant. Thus, I de-identified participant information. I will not use the information collected for this study for any future research of my own or share participant information with other researchers. The audio recordings

were kept until accurate written notes were made. They were then destroyed. This is particularly essential for this study since participants could potentially discuss systems in place in their current places of employment and could include negative feedback regarding their employer.

Subjectivity was inherently challenged throughout the process and was maintained as I have shared many of their experiences. This unbiased disposition as a researcher is essential throughout the data collection as well as throughout the writing process. Truly, the "issues of ethics in writing all revolve, to some extent, around issues of power and respect" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 295).

Issues of Validity and Trustworthiness

Throughout the research process, validity is a central concern. Ravitch and Carl define validity as, "the way that researchers can affirm that their findings are faithful to participants' experiences" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 186). In light of this, I worked to ensure the voices of my participants were represented accurately during all phases of the process. One possible issue with validity is the participants might not have felt that their experiences were accurately portrayed. Thus, asked clarifying questions throughout the interview to ensure I captured the thoughts and stories shared by participants correctly.

Given my experiences in the field of education, I also reflected regularly on any biases that I bring to the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This was important during the interviews, while coding, and when presenting the data and conclusions. Engaging in member checking throughout this process was vital to ensure the credibility of the study. Therefore, I shared my research findings with participants for feedback and made the appropriate adjustments.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations in this study include having a small number of participants, which limits the scope of the information gathered. In terms of delimitations, all of the participants have experience in the same region of the United States as one of their reference points. Due to the nature of qualitative research, the realities experienced by participants are their own and will thus impact the replicability of the study since the experiences are specific to the participants. This will be important to communicate as a potential weakness in qualitative research.

Summary

In summary, phenomenological interviewing was utilized to better understand the phenomenon of building and maintaining reciprocal trust between principals and central offices leaders in school districts. Data collected was based on the perceptions of principals shared during one-on-one interviews with each principal participant. Five principals participated in this study.

Data analysis was conducted by creating codes from the transcripts of the interviews, developing themes and finally identifying common representations of the essence of the lived experiences of research participants. Throughout the interviewing and data collection and analysis processes, member checking and clarifying understanding of the experiences of participants was essential. Ethical research conditions were considered throughout the research process. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained for all participants.

The limitations and delimitations of this study were also considered when developing this proposal. While the number of participants and regional constraints might be limiting factors in the replicability of the study, further research can be conducted to understand a larger

scope. Interviews with central office leaders could also be conducted to understand their perceptions as well.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the perceptions of principals regarding the effectiveness of practices contributing to the development of reciprocal trust between principals and district-level school administrators. Studies focusing on the implementation of educational initiatives have indicated that in districts where reciprocal trust is evident between district office and building leaders, initiatives are more likely to succeed (Lawson, et al. 2017; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). This chapter will present important findings from participant interviews and describe participants' perceptions of these practices in school districts. The experiences that participants shared will uncover elements that influence the strength of reciprocal trust between leaders and structures experienced within systems that have built trusting relationships. Findings that emerged from the interviews are identified in this chapter.

Specifically, concepts explored will address the study's main questions:

Central question: What practices do principals perceive as contributing to the development of reciprocal trust between principals and district-level leaders?

Sub questions: What tools for communication and decision-making structures contribute to effective collaboration between principals and district level leaders?
What is the lived experience of communication and relational linkages within the context of a reform initiative?

The above questions guided the interviews. Given the semi-structured approach, the responses that participants provided prompted follow-up questions and generated more information. After the interviews were completed, transcripts were analyzed using an inductive

coding process to identify data common among participant experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Findings resulted from common evidence of factors contributing to reciprocal trust between central office administrators and principals as identified by participants through relational analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019)

Results of the analysis indicated the emergence of four themes:

Theme 1: Communication

Theme 2: Decision-making structures

Theme 3: Relationships

Theme 4: Leadership Style

The following provides a more in-depth account of participant experiences. While the themes of the findings identify the broad concept, the rich experiences of participants will be detailed in their words.

Theme 1: Communication

The primary topic of discussion in interviews conducted revolved around communication as the key factor in developing reciprocal trust between principals and central office leaders. All five principals talked extensively about communication and cited examples of communication structures that facilitated the trust process. This discussion will include examples of the importance participants placed on communication in general, one on one communication formats, electronic communication, the impact of video conferencing, the importance of content of communications and engaging in honest conversations together and communication during administrative team meetings.

In terms of the importance of a solid communication culture, in a district where a principal felt reciprocal trust was evident, Principal E found the communication structure to be strong in frequent informal and formal opportunities. She noted, "It was just this constant ebb and flow and this constant feedback cycle to each other that's embedded in the system." She found that this consistency in communication afforded an ease with implementing new initiatives since healthy dialogue was ongoing.

All five principals expressed the need for informal and formal communication. Accordingly, finding opportunities for communication and the willingness of both groups to engage in informal and formal communications were both essential components. These two components characterized the culture leading to reciprocal trusting relationships. As Principal D described it, "We knew each other over the everyday nuances of our jobs." Principal A echoed the importance of building a robust communication structure saying, "I think communication is the biggest thing. The best ways to do it, is our ongoing communication and in formal settings and informal settings." Consequently, all principals noted the importance of prioritizing the intentional planning of opportunities for informal and formal communication.

One-on-one Communication

In response to the question regarding communication considerations for building reciprocal trust, Principal B felt strongly about the impact one-on-one face-to-face conversations have on building relationships and creating a strong foundation for collaboration. In her experience, a regularly scheduled touchpoint is necessary between leaders. She said, "I value that as being a face to face conversation and some sort of agenda that's set in place. We're going to get together and have these one on ones (…) on what your goals are, what support you need."

Similarly, Principal C discussed her one-on-one meetings with her superintendent that occur every week. Principal C said the superintendent plans them as coaching sessions and an opportunity to be in the buildings. She noted that it is a great opportunity to build that relationship. She affirmed:

> That is a good practice, I mean it does help. I should probably circle back to that for the trust piece. Yes, in that he's regularly in my space, I have regular contact with him. I need to have that connection with you. I hear his past stories and stuff so it does build more of a connection.

If face-to-face is not possible, all of the principals noted that the phone would be their second choice for one-on-one communication. Manifesting a culture where people feel comfortable picking up the phone and asking to partner on an initiative or for advice was an indicator to all of the principals that reciprocal trust was evident. All five principals had experiences where that was and was not the culture of the leadership team. Principal B felt that "I also could pick up the phone in my old district and people would answer. Like I can actually get in touch with people." She lamented that that is not the case in her present role. Principal E concurred that "phone calls were probably the easiest thing to do." Adding to that, she commented that trust was built when "knowing I can call them and they call me back in kind of a timely manner." Principal C echoed that sentiment and related the timeliness of returned phone calls to the level of trusting relationship she sensed she held with members of the central office administrative team.

Electronic Communication

Contrarily, e-mail has been noted by three of the principals as having a negative impact on communication and relationships. Principal B noted, "There have been multiple emails this year that get (. . .) misinterpreted. Because again you're missing out on a lot of that body language." She went on to explain that emails are not conducive to collaboration and an

authentic conversation on a topic. Emails that should have been a conversation can come off unintentionally as cold and accusatory.

Principal B also noted the time that is required for an email conversation instead of a topic that lends itself better to a verbal connection:

> In my current district, it's like oh just shoot me an email. Okay, so I do that. But then I mean two or three emails later, and I still haven't got an answer for something so that's not efficient, right? Or effective. That I'm not getting my answer, or is it timely? So then I'll pick up the phone and I'll call. Well you know, nobody will be around or they won't answer. So I'll send a text and so now you've gotten, to the point where it's like broken down into like shooting a text or a chat or something like that. You've lost out on like the efficiency.

Principal E concurred that "Email would get a little messy. I felt like we relied on that too much sometimes." Additionally, Principal D summarized the limitations of electronic communications when she said, "That one sentence email isn't enough. Context is everything." Principal B felt equally as strongly about the effectiveness of tools used when she said, "I don't want to text, I don't want to google chat. You know I want, I want to just have a conversation." Thus, e-mails were identified as having the potential to negatively impact relationship building.

Video Conferences Replacing In-person Meetings

Recently, many meetings utilize a video conferencing format in the field of education. When asked about how this has impacted the development of reciprocal trust, all of the principals concurred that video conferencing has negatively impacted their relationships with central office administrators. The main reason all cited was summarized by Principal C when she said, "You don't get a feel for the people. There is a certain amount of human-ness that we feel when we're running meetings."

Principal D reinforced this concern on how this communication tool has influenced the development of relationships between participants:

I think it's hurt us. I mean we're more efficient and a lot of ways. But, it hurt like your understanding of each other and even people's sense of humor. Like in that just natural exchange of being in person. Humor is good. What someone likes to eat or drink or what their day is like or what kind of morning they had. You don't get that on zoom. And so I think it's really impacted relationships and pliability of exchange. It's just not- it's just not there.

Principal E also mentioned the loss of humor and the importance of laughing together as a team. She said:

> You don't banter on zoom, (. . .) you have obligatory politeness, and then you jump into your meeting. It's those casual exchanges that we lose and in the loss of those, I think we lose a lot of the trust that just comes with like a sense of you like getting a sense of you, I think that's been really hard for me.

Two of the principals shared the issue of the additional distraction of texting others on the side while on a video meeting. Principal C discussed that because of these ongoing text message exchanges, people miss the full conversation due to "side bars going on constantly during meetings. So thus a lot of judgment, a lot of like snarkiness, a lot of feelings, I think, get hurt because we can't -because we take things out of context." Whereas, she acknowledged in an in-person meeting, it is easier to be fully present in the conversation since texting others in the meeting is not part of their meeting norms.

Principal B concurred, "I also feel like there's a lot of disparate chats going on and we're not all at the table, because of you know-a small group- you'll be in a zoom meeting and you'll all of a sudden see five people look down at their phone." Her concern was that this practice has helped develop a rift in the relationships for those in the meeting knowing there are ongoing side conversations.

The advantage of video conferencing was acknowledged by principal B in being able to have more conversations quickly without the constraint of travel for a group. She indicated that for smaller groups, when a collaborative decision is needed, this method at least allows for a time sensitive conversation without requiring travel time and greater impacts on the schedules of the individuals attending the meeting.

Communication Content

In addition to frequent informal and formal communication opportunities, two of the principals described the content of effective communication. Principal A identified honesty and the ability to have hard conversations as essential to building trust. She identified a spectrum in this regard. In some cases, the answer a leader might give to a proposed idea is an absolute no without further dialogue. On the other, the individual might try to placate the other leader with compliments or feigned interest but ultimately say no. She said, "I think you have to be clear and with the answer, but have compassion. Being clear is really important." She described wanting to know the truth of the situation and clarity in the conversation.

Principal E also highlighted the importance of open communication. In a district where she found reciprocal trust to be evident, she found that "when we didn't necessarily agree with things, we would talk it through. Having those conversations and each party being open to like pushing back and not taking things personally." Facilitating a culture of open and honest communication was noted as important to all five of the principals interviewed.

Administrative Team Meetings

All of participants cited administrative team meetings between central office administrators and principals as one of the main opportunities for communication and

relationship building. Meeting structure, culture, and purpose were reported as contributing to or hindering the development of reciprocal trust between leaders.

Three of the principals interviewed provided examples of meeting openers designed with the intention of building relationships. Principal C said, "We spend 10-15 minutes every admin council meeting talking about good things. That has helped create connection, because you hear other people's stories and a little bit more fun." Similarly, Principal E noted, "We started asking a really random question of the group that they fill in the ahead of time. For the holidays, we did 'what was your favorite childhood toy?' It was so funny to talk about them."

Principal D also noted the need for the meeting opener to be personalized instead of feeling obligatory or work-related. In a district where she identified strong trusting relationships, meetings opened with colleagues discussing family and personal lives instead of traditional ice-breakers. She said, "It was truly, authentically personalized. So the connections were personal and specific and relevant to what your current life looks like. It was meaningful."

All principals agreed that taking the time at the opening of a meeting to intentionally build connections between central office team members and principals is important. All noted different experiences and spoke to how the approach to this practice depended on the culture of the district. Principal E summed up the results of dedicating meeting time to connecting saying, "It creates like these weird invisible threads that it takes five minutes to do. It just sets the tone for the whole meeting."

Another suggested method for building trust was the inclusion of weekly updates about what was happening at buildings around the district. Principal D said she strengthened her knowledge as a principal through learning about what was happening at other buildings and how it was handled at administrative team meetings. She found that it created "this shared investment

in the professional realities that we were going through, because it made us all one." She also noted that having an understanding of how central office administrators were involved in other buildings gave her ideas on how she could partner with them as well. She reported, "It made me better use them as a resource and trust that it wasn't like viewed negatively that I wanted to do that with them."

All of the principals indicated that it is the role of the superintendent to set the purpose and structure of the meeting. How this is implemented varied in each principal's experience. All of the principals noted that setting the intention and focus of the weekly meeting is important along with having time to ask questions and engage in conversation and collaboration. Principal D described effective administrative team meetings "that had their own purpose and focus and we knew what we did in those meetings. We also knew what we didn't do in those meetings. It was designed to be true leadership vision and long term planning."

Principal A included the importance of maintaining the vision and mission of the district as a central component of meetings. She noted her current district centers meetings around the essential question, "What do we do that impacts student learning?" When decisions are made, the group follows up with "How do we support each other in order to do what it takes to impact student learning?" She believed that this framing of questions contributes to a collective effort around the goal and opens the lines of communication between leaders.

Within clearly defined structures, principals indicated the degree of collaboration in a meeting impacts the ability to build reciprocal trust between leaders. Principal B contrasted her experiences in two districts noting a shift from a district where "we would talk through things together as a team, and we had very specific goals that were focused." In her current role, she indicated, "We have weekly meetings and the agenda is posted and it's basically like central

office is going to communicate information out to principals. I struggle with that because I'm a super collaborative person. Meetings just feel like a task list."

Part of creating a culture of collaboration for the meetings was found in how agendas are set according to several principals. All of the principals reported the effectiveness of establishing collaborative meeting agendas as an element in building reciprocal trust. This includes the opportunity for principals to add items to the agenda and not just attend to the agenda items of central office administrators in these joint meetings. Principal E noted that "it was very comfortable to add topics to agendas. Agendas were super fluid places." Agendas then became a place for two-way communication and reinforced the concept of reciprocal.

Conversely, Principal B noted that when she adds items to the agenda in a district with a low level of reciprocal trust, "it's very easily passed over sometimes. Subliminally that says, I don't value you. I don't value what you bring to the table. I don't value what you have to say." She noted that it's almost worse to invite questions and additions to the agenda and then dismiss them entirely than to not have that as an option.

While all principals discussed that administrative team meeting time is a common practice contributing to the development of reciprocal trust between central office leaders and principals, the content and culture of the meetings can vary vastly. Principals indicated that the intentional planning of these meetings can facilitate greater communication between leaders and thus, the development of reciprocal trust. Principals found that designing structures to include building personal connections, sharing problems of practice, grappling with agenda items together, and co-creating agendas were effective practices.

In this finding, the data revealed how the types and tools for communication influences a principal's perception of reciprocal trust. The examples indicate that there need to be multiple

and varied opportunities for formal and informal communication. Moreover, in-person communication is preferred. A culture where open and honest communication is valued will further drive the development of reciprocal trust between central office leaders and principals.

Theme 2: Decision-making

Understanding Roles

All of the interviews revealed that decision-making structures in a school district influenced their perception of reciprocal trust with central office administrators. All stated that they understand the role of the central office administrator to make the final decision. Principal A noted the importance of all decisions tying back the vision and mission of the district and the responsibility of district leaders to link all decisions back to that. However, all contended that collaborative structures where their input was valued increased trust. When it comes to the decisions that need to be made by a central office leader, Principal B asserted the importance of central office leaders understanding what warrants a discussion and buy-in vs. what is a directive. She said, "That's what a good leader will do is understand, when I just need to make the call and make the decision, versus hey let's talk this through more because this has a greater impact."

Principal E outlined what a central office leader should have planned when engaging in decision-making with a group. She noted, "You have to have a dynamic leader who has a clear vision and like anchors to that vision and brings you back to the vision when you're working through the tough decisions." Two of the other principals similarly discussed the need to stay focused on the vision and mission of the district when engaging in decision-making.

Additionally, Principal E emphasized the importance of the superintendent outlining the non-negotiables in making the final decision. In her experience, when outlining the non-

negotiables but leaving room for the group to talk the matter through, Principal E indicated the team felt that the approach was not top-down but that in fact their input was valued. She recognized the role of central office leaders is to make the final decision, but that understanding what the non-negotiables are helped the team realize solutions that were actionable.

Before the principal group engages in collaborative decision-making with central office leaders, Principal A discussed the need for central office administrators to "do their homework and looking to see what other people are doing and getting some other ideas." She defined this as one of their roles of central office leaders in ensuring the group had the information they needed to make the best decision for the district.

Decision-making Culture

When a decision needs to be made and issues are brought to the table, the decision-making culture of the district can indicate the degree of reciprocal trust perceived by principals. Principal D detailed the decision-making culture in a school district with high levels of reciprocal trust saying, "They trusted your intent was to be a partner. There was a 'we're' leading this and the decision wasn't predetermined." Principal A concurred that the culture around decision-making has an impact on trust commenting, "It's a we, it's not an I or me conversation. When you have that leadership, that decision-making is not done in a silo. When there is a failure, there's no blame game of 'who fault is it?'"

As central office leaders and principals approach the decision-making process, leaders can set the stage for a collaborative conversation by emphasizing this sense of "we" and "us" according to Principal A. Principal D detailed the process adding language she's heard in such meetings like, "What do we believe we need to do? Now what are our options? And then, you are in this constant dynamic of problem solving the best path forward together."

Principal E emphasized the importance of developing a safe trusting culture when decision-making is happening. She addressed the meetings in a district where she felt a high level of reciprocal trust saying, “We could be very open with our opinions. I didn't feel like anybody got their hand slapped. I never felt like there was like a hidden agenda. When we walked out of that room we all had the same message.”

In discussing successful decision making cultures, Principal A noted the philosophy in her current district is, “We make a decision together. If we don’t have success from it, we learn from it and grow. There’s no blame. There isn’t the pressure to if you fail. Failure is a part of getting to success.” She discussed the feeling of safety she feels as a principal in being able to have hard conversations after the results of a shared decision indicated failure instead of success. She believes the team is more likely to take risks and be open and honest in this type of culture.

Principal B identified the steps of cultivating this culture declaring, “Taking the time, investing in those conversations, building those relationships, helping define that culture, and collaborating around common goals and all of that, defines leadership versus management.” This culture ultimately needs to be built with members of the leadership team investing in these processes.

Structures for Decision-making

When asked the central question regarding practices that facilitate the development of reciprocal trust, Principal E’s initial response went straight to decision-making when she said:

> I think, transparency. I feel like the leadership in my previous district was that like everybody was at the table when it came to decision-making, right? And it really felt like you had a voice sitting at that table. And it felt like if the superintendent wasn't comfortable moving forward with things he would be transparent about it. He would really say, ‘I'm struggling with this like you got to talk me through it, this is the decision the team is making.’”

Having a voice at the table was important to all principals and expressed by Principal B who said that reciprocal trust is built when "We're all a part of decision-making together as a team. That my voice is as a building leader versus a central office leader brings a different perspective. That my input solicited and valued and integrated into things moving forward." Principal D concurred, "We were talking from a place of cultivated shared inquiry and understanding. And then we could lead that out with a lot more trust, because it was this cross role group of people who all came to the same understanding together."

When it comes to decision-making, Principal B expressed a strong desire to be a part of the process as well. She indicted, "I want to wrestle with problems together. We have a huge range of elementary principals and each person brings different strengths to the table, and I think that's so valuable. We need to tap into each other's strengths." Several principals indicated the need to identify the strengths in the leadership team, both with principals and central office leaders and leverage those strengths in moving the organization forward.

For instance, in thinking about working with the business department in her district, Principal A identified that it can be difficult, "If people don't have an educational background and understand working with kids and like sit in the classroom and understand how this purchase impacts kids." However, she also noted that principals "have to understand why someone is saying yes or someone is saying no from their lens of things. That is important for us to all understand each other." Thus, decision-making with individuals with varied perspectives is essential.

Furthermore, structures for the involvement of multiple layers of stakeholders in decisions altered the perception principals had of reciprocal trust in their relationships with central office leaders. Principal E noted that a superintendent she has worked with was "a big

believer in whatever we decide at the leadership level it goes back through your SLT (School Leadership Team) down to your PLC (Professional Learning Community) and like backup so the expectation was this continuous improvement cycle." Similarly, Principal B also commented on the importance of carrying information through to multiple layers in order to make the best decision. She compared her experiences in her previous district with her current district saying, "We went back to our buildings we talked with our grade level teams. We worked through things together, and how is this going to affect each department? So, there was a system in my old district." In her current district, she contended that decisions are made by central office leaders and she is instructed to relay the message to building staff without garnering input to bring back to the table. Having structures where central office leaders involve not only the principals but also other district stakeholder increased the perception of reciprocal trust by principals.

Principal D addressed the structures of decision-making processes engaged in by district committees that principals are a part of adding, "As a building leader, you are a partner with your district leadership, because everybody was embedded in the process. Then that stakeholder input was collected fairly efficiently, because they trusted the voices." She surmised that having building leaders involved in different decision-making areas, teaming with central office leaders allows for input in decision-making along the way during the implementation of the varied initiatives.

Finally, Principal A brought the conversation on the benefits of shared decision-making back to system-wide ownership and student learning. She found that change happens after decisions are made when everyone involved can "buy-in, believe, and take ownership of it, that's

the key. It only happens when people, every person has like some ownership and stake in that they feel like I was really a part of it."

Similar to communication, the roles, structures, and culture are all keys to enacting decision-making practices that build reciprocal trusting relationships between central office leaders and principals. When these three elements are understood and developed in an effective manner, principals perceive a strong sense of reciprocal trust in the organization. When there is not a level of reciprocity and partnership, reciprocal trust suffers.

Theme 3: Relationships

When asked about practices to build reciprocal trust, all of the participants relayed stories that highlighted the importance of intentional opportunities for relationship building. Positive relationships with central office leaders were identified as a factor that increases the perception of reciprocal trust by principals. Principal C addressed this directly saying, "Hearing people's stories and getting to know them as people has helped develop a certain amount of trust." In discussing relationships, principals focused in on a few key factors. Major topics included building visits, time purposed for relationship building, factors that contribute to relationship building and the need for actively working on relationships to be a two-way effort.

All of the principals acknowledged that when positive relationships exist, it is easier to accomplish the work of the school district. Principal B addressed the importance of building trust first when she said, "Investing the time- not saying we're not doing anything else, - but that relationship and that culture piece is so important to build first. Yeah, then we can dig really deep into the other stuff." Principal A concurred, "You have to know people to work together, you have to know them as human beings and their strengths and weaknesses. If you don't have relationships with people, it makes it very hard to work together." When asked how

relationships impact reciprocal trust Principal D expounded upon the topic saying, “I think it made the hard decisions and the times when topics get tricky or the times feelings got hurt easier and insulated all of that. Creating connections outside of the topic sustains like a true trusting relationship.”

Building Visits

Three of the principals specifically addressed the benefits of central office administrators visiting school buildings to further develop relationships. Principal D discussed the regularly planned building visits by the curriculum team and maintenance director in her district. She noted that being present in the building and focusing on building topics and not just what the central office administrator needed from the building, provided opportunities to understand the realities in school buildings. She said, “Building leaders initiated building topic conversations and felt like they could trust that every topic of conversation was valued if you thought it was worth having.”

Principal B acknowledged that the presence in the building built trust with her but also created a trusting atmosphere with teachers. She commented, “It's important to me, obviously I want them to come, I want them to see, but I want them there because I want my teachers to see that they're invested in what's happening in the classroom.” She contended that this investment in time in the building eases conversations in her team meetings with teachers and correlates to a larger districtwide culture of trust.

Only one of the principals reported that their superintendent makes regular visits to the building but all mentioned that they would find regular visits by central office leaders valuable in building a trusting relationship. One mentioned that she only sees the superintendent at the

building three times per year but would prefer it more often. For Principal C, there are regular weekly meetings in her building with her superintendent. These weekly meetings are purposed as coaching sessions but lead to personal conversations, which Principal C said has helped create a connection. She maintained that visits are a way in which he shows that his relationships with principals are important.

Planned Opportunities for Relationship-building

All five of the principals interviewed thought that it was necessary to implement planned opportunities for relationship building. Principal A affirmed this saying, "I think you have to set up opportunities for interaction. You do have to build in time for team building activities or going out to lunch or you know just like getting to know each other." Principal B discussed the culture of a district she worked in where she felt a strong sense of reciprocal trust. She addressed the idea that they were "forced to spend time in the people business with each other, not just the action business and that decision making business." She indicated that this built a strong relationship centered culture and included the statement, "You came together like family and you cared about each other like family. And that that was like genuine."

Two principals discussed planned off-site summer retreats that include events where central office administrators and principals can have fun together with a non-work related activity. Principal C gave the example of an ax-throwing outing from the summer that gave the groups stories to share as they approached the new school year. She did however contend that these events should be scheduled more regularly and not a once a year occasion. She endorsed the idea of regularly planned outings throughout the school year.

Principal E recommended the practice of eating together as a central office and principal team after administrative team meetings. This was a twice-monthly occurrence in her district.

She believes that sharing food together is a natural and easy way to generate informal conversations and build personal relationships. In a district where this was the common practice her superintendent insisted that they switch up who they were sitting with each luncheon to expand their relationship circle. She commented that it never felt forced but, "it was definitely some structured times to like have those quick questions or the check-ins."

Time and District Size

Participants mentioned two variables in the development of trusting relationships. In reflecting on the development of reciprocal trust and the relationships required for that trust, principals discussed the time it takes in terms of years in a position as well as the size of the school district and administrative team in helping or hindering these relationships.

Two of the principals contrasted the way they were able to move things forward because of established relationships in a districts where they had spent over 10 years versus where they worked for just 2-3 years. Principal C noted that in a district where she spent over 10 years, "We could do things with a completely different pace. Because we had been together so long, we just picked up the phone got right to business." In her current district, she said she is intentional with adding in personal conversation to help build those relationships before broaching a work-related topic. However, she has realized the speed at which tasks are accomplished are much slower without that base of the strong relationships she felt required time to develop.

In discussing a district where she spent 16 years, Principal B noted that if she had a question for a central office administrator, she "would just stop by and say 'hey I'm here you got a minute?'" However, that is not the case in her current district where she has been for less than 3 years. She indicated that she does not have established relationships with the central office leaders, so the practice of dropping by to discuss an issue is not well received.

Principal B wondered about how the size of the district influences the ability to develop strong relationships. She commented, "My old district was a smaller district, so maybe it was easier. Where my current district there are a lot more schools. So, maybe it's a little bit more difficult from the district perspective to work with that many building leaders." Principal A concurred noting the small size of her current district makes it easier to connect with central office leaders. In thinking about how a large district she previously worked in functions, she noted, "It's great that you have that many people, but then you have to trust all those people as well."

Relationships Require the Effort of All

Two of the principals directly addressed the need for principals to take an active role in making relationship building a priority. Principal A discussed her experiences where the onus for any initiative is on central office administrators. However, she argued that principals should also take ownership of the relationship building process and look for ways to support those in central office roles. Principal A said, "I think the key is reciprocal. A relationship, whether it's working, dating, all of those things, it takes two people as adults. In a relationship it's, what do we bring to the table, and what are we going to do?"

While all of the principals commented on whether or not they thought individual central office leaders were open to conversations initiated by the principals, two described their efforts to invite central office leaders into the buildings and engage them in joint processes. However, each expressed that they desired a greater degree of openness. Principal B discussed seeking ways to invite central office leaders into her building. She looks for areas of expertise that she believes staff would benefit from being directly shared with staff. Principal B explained how she asked one for this assistance, "I think that having you there, rather than me being this pass

through of information, having you there just for them to feel heard." Her overall sentiment about wanting central office administrators in the building was best expressed by saying, "Come to my building -sit and talk with my teachers. You don't have to have all the answers. I know it's probably scary that you think teachers are going to unload on you. They unload on me and that's Ok."

In some instances, the culture is touted as collaborative and relationship centered but the perceived reality can demonstrate the contrary. Two of the principals shared experiences where the message from central office was that it was a collaborative culture but found that not to be the case in practice. Principal D noted that in a district she worked in, "There's distance between what we want our culture to be and what we're doing to make that happen. When it's not authentic, when it's not coming from a belief, rather, because you want people to feel a certain way." Principal B echoed this idea saying, "Do your actions show that you value those relationships? Because if we're not able to collaborate, if there's no medium for us to work together and ask questions, and you know facilitate those conversations, do we value relationships?"

Ultimately, principals discussed the fact that building relationships that lead to reciprocal trust need to be prioritized. The effort in developing relationships needs to be reciprocal in nature as well. A motto frequently communicated in Principal D's district is "your success is our success and our success is your success." To develop that degree of reciprocity and collegiality, principals asserted that a concerted effort on all parts is required.

Theme 4: Leadership Style

All of the principals linked the traits of a leader or leadership styles to positive experiences they have had with reciprocal trusting relationships. Leadership styles, they contend are demonstrated through a leader's approach and common practices. Within this theme, principals identified key personality traits or leadership styles they have identified in systems where they perceived greater amounts of reciprocal trust. In some cases, this was in the leader's disposition regarding their role, the leader's personality, or the leader's focus on creating a culture of collegiality within the system.

Role Disposition

In school districts, leadership roles can be regarded in terms of a hierarchy in which central office leaders have more power than building leaders. Within that framework, some central office leaders can choose to create top-down systems or collaborative systems. Principal D discussed how those in leadership view their relationships with power. She noted "the best leaders in my experience are reluctant ones. Like where someone was tapping them saying you're great at this have you thought about leadership?" She strongly believes that individuals that identify with servant leadership should be in central office leaders. Leaders with a servant leadership disposition, she asserted, lead more successful collaborative organizations.

Likewise, Principal A found that trusting relationships were created in a collaborative system when she knew she could contact the superintendent for help and support at any time. She felt that with her current superintendent, back up was available whenever she needed it. She described a time where she had a conflict with a parent in the parking lot at dismissal and called him. He showed up five minutes later to assist. Principal A affirmed that this was one example

of how central office leaders can demonstrate active support instead of a hierarchical relationship.

Personality

Principal E identified the role of a leader's personality in influencing their ability to help develop reciprocal trusting relationships. She noted, "I do think some things can be learned, but man, if you got a good personality, the road to it is just so natural for you." She contended that a relational personality draws in those who work with a leader, but follow-through is equally important. She emphasized, "The trust happens quicker if the personality is there, and when you have the other components of structures that maintain that collaborative culture, the trust is maintained."

A leader's personality was also a topic for Principal D. "I think it is personality based. If you are self-promoting person, I don't think you have any place and a leadership role at a district level. Principal D further discussed the mindset of a central office leader as contributing to their ability to develop relationships saying, "I think the filter you bring to how you view other people, whether you view people as mostly doing good wanting to do good work. That's a humanistic leadership side." Principal D confirmed that these personality traits and dispositions can lead to the development of reciprocal trust noting that individuals feel valued when leaders believe in the positive intentions and celebrate the contributions of others.

Principal C acknowledged the varying personalities of central office leaders in discussing her comfort level in contacting these leaders and engaging in communication. She noted that for some of the central office leaders she works with, her perception of their personalities has caused her to be more or less likely to engage in a collaborative conversation. She contended that with those in her organization that are relational and open, reciprocal trust is more likely to develop.

A Culture of Collaboration

Building systems that breed reciprocal trust require leaders who view the work of a school district as a collaborative endeavor according to the participants interviewed. Principal A emphasized the idea, "You're only as strong as your weakest link, so if we're not all as one team together, then we're not going to make progress." She noted that in her current district, that is the team-centered culture she senses in the majority of her interactions with central office leaders.

In discussing her ideal working situation, Principal B acknowledged, "I really like to work with people who like to collaborate. I like to bring somebody something that's super difficult and problem solve together. Could I do it on my own? Absolutely! But, I value the connection piece of it." She indicated that in places where this is a common practice that exists, with both central office leaders and principals bringing problems of practice to each other, reciprocal trust develops more quickly.

When asked what type of central office leaders help build cultures where reciprocal trust flourishes, Principal D said, "I would fill these leadership positions with people who would do anything to help their teammates and who would do anything to see them shine. Then, if you're skilled and capable, you have that mindset, the rest of this happens." She reported that in districts where she has identified this as the mindset, there is a greater sense of motivation from all involved in the work.

The word "we" was apparent in participant interviews when discussing working with central office leaders that helped develop reciprocal trust. Principal D noted, "It's just a we about our work." Principal A confirmed that idea that, "It's a we. It's not an I or me conversation." When principals discussed stories where they felt valued as an equal in terms of

the work, this word "we" continued to surface. Principal D noted, "there was a shared belief in the positive intent. Everybody wanted to do what was best. There was very little advocacy for separate agendas, the agenda was improving our outcomes for kids."

Leadership styles, personality traits and the dispositions of central office leaders surfaced through conversations with all participants. Preferences for working with individuals with certain leadership styles and personalities were voiced. All of the principals acknowledged the idea that these elements are important precursors to the development of reciprocal trust between leaders.

Chapter Summary

Communication, decision-making structures, relationships, and leadership styles were all themes found to be relevant themes throughout the interviews with principal participants. In the theme communication, participants discussed at length how opportunities and methods for communication influenced their perceptions of reciprocal trust with central office leaders. The theme of decision-making surfaced as relevant to how principals understand their role in the hierarchy of leadership. Principals indicated that the structure and culture around decisions relevant to their work furthered or hindered perceptions of reciprocal trust. Relationships were the third theme identified during interviews. Within this theme, principals identified key components including intentional opportunities for relationship building while also discussing issues that could impede the development of strong relationships. Finally, leadership style as a themed, highlighted participant stories indicating that this is a component perceived as pertinent to the development of reciprocal trust. Principals cited role disposition, personality, and focus on a collaborative team approach to leadership as central to this theme. The four themes identified demonstrate components that affect reciprocal trust between central office administrators and

building principals. The themes are related to previous research on this topic and are strongly linked to practices that districts can implement to develop strong reciprocal relationships. Chapter 5 will explore these connections further.

Chapter 5: Discussion & Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore practices perceived by school principals that contribute to development of reciprocal trust between central office leaders and principals. Reciprocal trust is defined as interorganizational or "cross-boundary relations between school leaders and district central office leaders" (Lawson et al., 2017). Other studies have found that in school districts with high levels of trust between these leaders, change initiatives flourish. Lawson et al. (2017) found evidence of the concept of reciprocal trust and communication between district and school leaders in districts with higher than typical academic achievement data. Through collecting the stories of principals, the purpose of this study was to be able to generate real strategies that districts can employ to build reciprocal trust between leaders.

This qualitative research study utilized in-depth interviews with five current building principals in buildings with students ranging from K-8. Interview data were coded through an open coding system, categorized, and organized by themes. Several themes that emerged from interviews connected with my theoretical framework while others emerged from interviews and were not previously identified. Evident through interviews was the desire of principals to have strong reciprocal trusting relationships with central office leaders.

The following research questions guided the interviews:

Central question: What practices do principals perceive as contributing to the development of reciprocal trust between principals and district-level leaders?

Sub questions: What tools for communication and decision-making structures contribute to effective collaboration between principals and district level leaders?

What is the lived experience of communication and relational linkages within the context of a reform initiative?

This chapter will explore analytic categories generated by interpreting the findings indicated in the previous chapter and how they connect to each other. Analysis will connect with previous research on categories identified.

Analytic Category 1: Effective communication

Analytic Category 2: Collaborative decision-making structures

Analytic Category 3: Intentional opportunities for developing relationships

Analytic Category 4: Leadership styles and dispositions

Analytic Category 1: Effective Communication

Communication was the theme that appeared in interviews with the greatest frequency through multiple questions. With all participants emphasizing the importance of communication, focusing in on what elements were perceived as having a greater impact on building reciprocal trust is imperative. This discussion will include examples of principal participant experiences with communication as it relates to building trust with central office administrators. As Durand et al. (2016) found, communication between district leaders builds trust and in return, trust aids communication.

In this analytic category, regardless of the format for communication, the data revealed principals perceive timely, regular, honest and collaborative conversations to create the conditions needed to develop reciprocal trust. A balance of informal and formal communication opportunities are also necessary and need to be planned with intentionality. Finally, principals noted preferences in communication methods.

The interview data indicate that frequent, planned opportunities for face-to-face communication were perceived as the most effective way to build reciprocal trust between central office leaders and principals. Principals B and C both found trusting relationships existed when one-on-one face-to-face meetings in their buildings were regularly planned with central office leaders. Several elements of these interactions contribute to the development of trust. A one-on-one meeting provides more opportunities for an equal exchange of ideas and informal conversation between leaders. This finding aligns with the study by Mombourquette and Bedard (2014) in which they found that when district leaders spent more time in schools engaging in informal conversations with principals, principals reported an increase in direct problem-solving conversations.

In-person, regularly scheduled administrative team meetings were also found to be important to building reciprocal trust for all five principals. Affirming this thinking, in their study, Leithwood and Azah (2017) asserted that when structures for face-to face communication occurred between principals and district leaders, principals indicated satisfaction with communication. All of the principals indicated that principal/ district office leader meetings afford the opportunity to engage in important conversations about initiatives and district events. Similarly, in their study focusing on principal's perspectives on helpful district leadership practices, Mombourquette and Bedard (2017) found that when principals and central office leaders met regularly at the central office and informally in their own school buildings, principals noted a more collegial rather than hierarchical structure.

However, not all communication in meetings was deemed equal in effectiveness. All principal participants had served as principals in more than one school district. Thus, they were able to compare practices of different districts and explain those they found most effective.

In breaking down agenda elements further to uncover items considered essential for communication certain practices were emphasized by participants. Principal D found time for conversations with the team about what was happening at other buildings, and how it was handled, extremely valuable. She found that it created "this shared investment in the professional realities that we were going through, because it made us all one." Such conversations provide an opportunity for collective guided learning which Zuckerman et al. (2017) found to be critical for school districts in performance adaptation in policy implementation. Additionally, Principals D, C, and E all found experiences where time was embedded for sharing personal topics valuable. They desired to know about each other's lives outside of work, which they felt helped to build trust among their administrative team.

Principals A, B, and D found that in districts where there was a clear purpose to the meeting and district leaders kept meetings focused on common goals, they perceived a greater degree of reciprocal trust. Knowing the purpose and focusing on shared goals allowed them to feel like everyone was on the same team and moving in the same direction. Research confirms this practice, as "regular formal and informal meetings with school leaders for the purposes of goal setting, curriculum and instructional development, vision alignment, and professional development" were apparent in odds-beating school districts implementing reform (Durand, et al., 2016, p. 58).

Meeting agendas are a vehicle for communication between building and district level leaders. All participants addressed the practice of collaboratively establishing agendas for joint building and district level leader meetings. Having the opportunity to add agenda items and questions allowed principals to feel that their concerns and ideas were valued. When the agenda

is utilized as a method for two-way communication, it elevates the concerns of individuals at the building level and creates a more collegial foundation for the meeting.

In addition to methods for communication, research participants cited favorable dialogic conditions and psychological safety to be important in their communications with district level leaders. Favorable dialogic conditions refer to the observable behaviors including individuals speaking freely, listening intently, challenging the values of the organization and an apparent diversity in points of view expressed (Raelin, 2016). When these dialogic conditions are apparent, psychological safety exists. Henriksen, & Paulsen, 2021 found that meetings where these conditions exist are more likely to build trust within the system and are a means of enacting positive change in school organizations.

A more recent development in the field of education has been the integration of video conferencing for meetings. This meeting format grew in regularity due to the COVID- 19 pandemic when in-person meetings were prohibited. While more convenient and still an opportunity to meet, this format has shifted the dynamic of meetings considerably for school leaders. Principals B, C, D, and E all commented on how the increase in video conferencing has negatively impacted relationship-building. While meetings were still regularly scheduled and timely information was communicated during meetings, opportunities for more informal and personal exchanges were limited in this format. A free flow exchange of ideas and questions are also hindered.

Analytic Category 2: Collaborative Decision-making Structures

All of the participants felt that collaborative structures for decision-making, where their input was valued increased trust. There was an understanding among the group that final decisions are up to district office leaders and central office leaders may therefore need to be more directive. However, they contended that trust was built through conversations regarding how decisions impact them at the building level.

Building systems and structures for shared decision-making processes during the implementation of any initiative is important. Durand et al. (2016) found that adaptive leaders realize that those in district leadership roles may not know all that is necessary to address complex change initiatives. Valuing and enlisting the collective knowledge and experience in the organization is essential to drive change. Principal A, identified the challenges in working with district administrators who have never worked in a school building. However, she also identified the need to understand the perspective of the individual in that central office role in decision-making. To ensure all perspectives are understood, time for collaborative conversations must be embedded during an initiative implementation.

Three of the principals interviewed identified the importance of the decision-making culture of a district leadership team. They were able to recount experiences in districts with a collaborative culture in general that lends itself to collaborative decision-making. A word that district leaders used in their experiences was “we” to signal the cohesiveness of the work and the decisions the team agreed by which to abide.

In order to build this collaborative culture for decision-making, researchers have identified several essential conditions. One example of a collaborative culture is that created through distributed leadership. Psychological safety, trust, and a culture of mutual learning are

three essential conditions to foster distributed leadership (Supovitz et al., 2019). Psychological safety provides that the sharing of vulnerabilities, mistakes, disagreements and opportunities to challenge thinking regardless of position are acceptable in an organization (Edmondson, 2012). Psychological safety was a condition identified by those interviewed as well. Principal E emphasized the importance of being able to be honest in disagreeing with a decision and knowing that after the meeting, "No one got their hand slapped." Principal A further discussed the feeling of safety she feels as a principal in being able to have hard conversations regarding a shared decision. She believes the team is more likely to take risks and be open and honest in this type of culture. This level of culture is essential to developing a true shared-decision making culture.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) wrote extensively on this topic asserting:

> Our own work on professional capital, plus John Hattie's work on the politics of collaborative expertise, show that collective efficacy is by far the most powerful change strategy if the group is focused and well-led. Leaders use the group to change the group. They participate as learners, but they also create a culture in which people have opportunities to learn from each other about specific problems and practices that work in solving them. Collaborating is not just about creating a place where people feel good but rather about cultivating the expertise of everyone to be focused on a collective purpose.

Those interviewed indicated that they looked to the Superintendent to lead out the efforts in fostering a collaborative decision-making culture. Tschannen-Moran (2014) addressed this in their work declaring, "Generally, in asymmetric power relations, it is paramount that the strongest one—in this case, the superintendent—embodies trust-building motives by being open, supportive, and granting professional discretion to the subordinate." Therefore, it is imperative

that the superintendent model this behavior in interactions with principals and take the lead in building this as a cultural practice among the leadership team in the organization.

Analytic Category 3: Intentional Focus on Developing Relationships

In this analytic category, the data revealed that intentional opportunities for relationship building were vital to developing relational and reciprocal trust between central office leaders and principals. As Bryk & Schneider (2003) define relational trust as a form of trust founded on effective social relationships between stakeholder groups, developing these social relationships is the key to building trust. All of the principals indicated that when they had strong relationships with central office leaders, the pace at which they felt they could effectively implement initiatives was also expedited. All participants relayed examples of events designed to build relationships when asked about factors contributing to their perceptions of trust in organizations in which they have served. All recognized the importance of positive relationships in change initiatives. Durand, et al. (2016) found that in odds-beating school districts, district leaders prioritized relationship building with school principals while implementing reform.

With the data indicating that in odds-beating schools, trusting relationships enabled performance adaptation (Zuckerman et al., 2017), time set aside for this work together is critical. This intentionality in creating opportunities for relationship building with the entire central office and principal team can be evidenced in a variety of ways. According to participants who felt greater degrees of reciprocal trust, relationships need to be built in terms of work but also have a personal component as well. Examples include time for team building, sharing meals, and generally focusing on knowing each other as people over the everyday business of the school district.

Team building and collaborative work opportunities are a way to build relationships within the scope of work goals. Taking time to intentionally learn about the personal lives of those we work with was important to participants as well. One way mentioned by two principals was to add an opener to meetings to build connections through sharing of personal stories. Two principals discussed summer retreats while another shared that their team had lunch together after administrative team meetings. All participants agreed that they wished these occasions for relationship building occurred more frequently. Among other researchers, Chen and Reigeluth (2010) note the importance of building in opportunities for informal communication to facilitate the effectiveness of the formal or more difficult conversations.

Further discussion revealed other specific types of opportunities that principal participants found to be the most impactful for relationship building. Three of the principals discussed the importance of having central office leaders visit buildings regularly. With regularly planned meetings at the building, the visits did not feel intimidating to building staff. Principals discussed feeling valued through these visits noting it showed that central office leaders valued hearing about what was happening at buildings and valued taking the time to build trusting relationships. Building visits invite informal and formal conversations that are key to building relationships and thus trust according to participants. Kowalski (2006) noted the need for greater attempts by district level leaders to engage in frequent formal communication and the exchange of ideas to increase improvement efforts. Regularly scheduled meetings with principals at the buildings are one way to achieve that goal.

Given the nature of the hierarchy of a school district, the responsibility of planning opportunities for relationship-building can be assumed to be that of central office leaders and likely the superintendent to create that culture. However, two principals recognized their role in

initiating these interactions. Principal A noted that when the goal is reciprocal trust, the effort to build relationships must also be reciprocal. She looks for ways to reach out, support central office leaders in their roles, and find ways to collaborate through projects. Principal B assumes this responsibility and invites central office leaders into her building regularly to establish and maintain relationships.

Research supports these findings. In districts where trust, risk-taking and interaction are prioritized, social capital and relationships are stronger and improve outcomes (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007). Time focused on relationship building strengthens social networks. In their work, Daly and Finnigan (2011) analyzed social networks finding the relationships between central office and building leaders to be consequential to implementation of improvement efforts. They found that when social networks are strong, leaders are able to utilize these networks as resources to improve implementation. Furthermore, the degree of reciprocity increases strength and the strength of the ties affects the speed and magnitude of change initiatives. (Liou et al., 2015). Thus, studies show elevating the significance of reciprocity in relationship building enhances outcomes.

In their research on reciprocal trust, Lawson, et al., (2017) underscored the importance of the interorganizational, cross-boundary relationships in school district administrative teams. Ultimately, according to research by Lawson, et al., 2017 leadership teams that lack trusting relationships are not able build effective systems for innovation implementation. Therefore, intentionally creating spaces and time to build those relationships is essential.

Analytic Category 4: Leadership Styles and Dispositions

This discussion will include examples of how leadership styles and personalities can precipitate or hinder the development of reciprocal trust between central office and building leaders. Areas of focus identified by principals include the leader's style and disposition regarding their role in the organization, their overall personality, and the culture the leader has built within the organization. Elements indicated by the principals have influenced the degree of reciprocal trust identified in their relationships with central office leaders.

In this analytic category, the data revealed that certain leadership styles lend themselves to developing reciprocal trust. Principal D identified servant leadership as one leadership style she has experienced in realizing a reciprocal trusting relationship with central office leaders. Research supports the relationship between servant leadership and a number of positive relational outcomes, including perceptions of trust in the leader (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Schaubroeck (2011) found that servant leaders drive team performance through prioritizing affect-based trust and psychological safety.

Principals indicated the personalities of central office leaders are also a key factor in the development of reciprocal trust. Principals D and E both argued that the ability to develop reciprocal trust is dependent on the personality of the leader noting that some things can be taught but ultimately the inherit traits of the leader can support or upend this goal. In their work, Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, and Liden (2019) support this notion declaring "regardless of the quality of a training program, we contend that it is unlikely that self-centered, dogmatic, narcissistic people can be trained to be other-centered, sensitive, empathetic, socially sensitive servant leaders" (p.129).

Personality paired with interpersonal practices to maintain a collaborative culture creates the conditions for maintained trust according to principals interviewed. These two factors influenced all of the principals on whether or not they perceived reciprocal trust. Where conditions were favorable, they were more likely to reach out to central office leaders. Principal C acknowledged that with those in her organization that are relational and open, reciprocal trust is more likely to develop. In their research, Meyer, Le Fevre and Robinson (2017) sought to examine interpersonal practices contributing to trustworthiness and trust propensity. They identified trustworthiness as based on personal qualities and behaviors such as reliability. This team additionally addressed trust propensity as willingness to rely on and trust others. Trust propensity, they argue, relies on a willingness to be vulnerable in a relationship.

Furthermore, Tschannen-Moran (2014) explores interpersonal practices through the five facets of trust- benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability and competence as they relate to schools. While the focus of her work relates to school based governance, the same tenants can be applied to the character dispositions of district leaders in increasing trust in relationships between central office administrators and principals. For example, the behavioral indicators of telling the truth, accepting responsibility, and avoiding manipulation are determinants of the trust factors of openness and honesty as mentioned by Principal C.

Finally, in terms of the culture leaders create in a district, central office leaders who focus on a collaborative effort instead of a top-down approach developed greater levels of reciprocal trust according to principal participants. Evidence of a collaborative culture cited by principal participants included shared-decision making processes, multiple and varied opportunities for two-way communication, meeting cultures that invite honest discussion, and observed availability of central office leaders.

Principals A, B, and D noted that they perceived more reciprocal trust when there was a culture created that allowed all participants to sense a "we" about the work. When central office leaders create a team-centered culture, principals feel they are valued and have a greater sense of motivation for the work. Overall, principals valued opportunities for connection and collaboration in problem-solving with central office leaders.

To create that collaborative culture, central office leaders must intentionally employ collaborative practices. To do so will harness the power of trusting relationships among educational leaders thus improving the educational outcomes for students (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008). An illustration of this is the study by Adams (2016) that focused on the implementation of a collaborative inquiry model of instructional leadership development. Adams found that central office leaders can impact learning through frequent time spent at schools focusing on learning, collaboration, and communication (Adams, 2016).

Examining the dialogic conditions in a district can determine if a culture of collaboration exists. All of the principals noted instances where they could sense reciprocal trust was evident depending on whether or not they felt comfortable voicing their concerns, ideas, and opinions. Dialogic conditions refer to the observable behaviors including individuals speaking freely, listening intently, challenging the values of the organization and an apparent diversity in points of view expressed (Raelin, 2016). While central office leaders may view themselves as collaborative, unless this exists, the power dynamic prohibits true reciprocal trust and the culture they believe exists is in name only.

Summary of Interpretation of Findings

This research study confirms the importance of reciprocal trusting relationships between principals and central office leaders and offers ideas for practices school district teams can implement to develop and sustain this trust. Principals interviewed argued that when reciprocal trust is evident in relationships with central office leaders, initiatives are implemented with greater fidelity and ease and they feel more valued in their roles. In order to achieve this level of reciprocal trust, school district administrative teams need to be intentional about putting systems in place to support the development and sustainability of reciprocal trusting relationships.

Ultimately, the work of a school district is to educate children. As this work is ever evolving, new initiatives are required to meet the needs of the children served. Districts are successful in implementing initiatives when they employ trust-building mechanisms (Lawson et al., 2017).

Reciprocal trust addresses the component of a power differential in the roles of central office leaders and principals. The concept was defined by Lawson et al. (2017) to address the interorganizational or cross-boundary relations between these two groups of leaders. Meyer et al. (2017) advise "those in power can relieve the tensions created by differential power relationships through specific behavioral practices that signal their trust-building motives" (p. 223). To accomplish this, four main themes were identified through interviews with the principals in this study. These themes overlap and intersect.

The most frequently discussed component in relation to building reciprocal trust was communication. Principals valued timely, regular, and honest communication. An equal exchange of ideas and opportunities for discussion on decisions are priorities in any communication. Principal participants identified in-person communication or phone

conversations to be more desired than phone conferencing for large meetings or e-mails for items that require discussion, questioning, and further exploration for successful action.

Principals also found greater degrees of reciprocal trust when there were collaborative decision-making structures established by central office teams. Opportunities for gathering information, input and feedback allowed for principals to take more ownership over the decisions made. Shared decision-making must have the conditions of psychological safety and the dialogic conditions necessary for open and honest conversation. Principals understand the hierarchy of the decision-making process. However, when their voices are a part of the discussion, the perspectives necessary for success are present.

In order to build trust in teams, intentional opportunities for building relationships are crucial. Whether it be time planned during arranged meetings for team building, openers where attendees are invited to share personal events, or time outside of the workday to connect, principals found these interactions to be valuable. Building social networks among school leaders increases social capital and the resources to address problems of practice.

Finally, understanding leadership styles and interpersonal practices can lead to building a culture where collaboration and collegiality are the norm. When leaders are willing to be vulnerable and focus on the facets of trust, a collaborative culture reciprocal trust can grow. Like finding time to build relationships, this work needs to be intentional and requires collective learning.

Implications for Practice

This research study has implications for central office leaders, principals, and preparation and professional development programs for school administrators. Leadership coursework and

professional development provide broad guidance on leadership styles and skills required of educational leaders. However, there is typically little direction on how these concepts are enacted in school districts. Moreover, many leadership books studied in educational leadership courses are written based on corporate leadership scenarios or pertain to principal leadership of school buildings. In terms of research on trusting relationships in education, most typically describe examples and practices for principal teacher relationships.

Recommendations for Central Office Administrators

While the demands of central office administrators are great, efficiencies are lost when there is not a deep connection to what is happening at school buildings. Central office leaders can make more informed decisions and move initiatives through more quickly if they take the time to establish and maintain reciprocal trusting relationships with principals. Breaking down traditional hierarchical organizational structures and distributing leadership to achieve a shared vision leads to better outcomes in a learning organization.

Therefore, district administrators working to create a culture of collaboration and conditions that foster the development of reciprocal trust is critical. The foundation of this work should be unrelenting support and availability by central office leaders to principals and schools. Since the children in school buildings are whom we all serve, being as connected as possible to the learning and every day work of a school is necessary. Principal D phrased it well recalling instances of district leaders signaling collaboration and reciprocity with questions such as, “What do we believe we need to do? Now what are our options?”

Some actionable ways to build this culture of reciprocal trust are to build in informal and formal opportunities for communication and two-way communication systems. These must be systematized and regular and not an afterthought. Through any communication, favorable

dialogic conditions must allow for the free exchange of ideas and questions without individuals taking it personally. A level of psychological safety must be fostered in the group to allow for this.

Central office leaders can plan meetings as opportunities for collaboration and conversation. A thorough review of agendas uncover whether meetings are geared toward providing information or allow for frequent exchanges and meaningful input of all attendees. Prioritizing face-to-face connections can allow for more interactive discussions. Informal conversations are also more likely to occur in the context of face-to-face meetings. While there is a convenience advantage to video conferencing for meetings, the relational benefits of an in-person meeting deserve consideration.

Central office leaders should also consider regular, planned building visits for leadership coaching, understanding the needs of the buildings, receiving feedback on the implementation of initiatives, and providing support for instructional leaders. Building visits also provide time to build relationships and engage in informal conversations that allow leaders to get to know one another on a personal level.

Collaborative decision-making structures can be designed for implementing initiatives or reviewing policies. All decisions should be in line with a common vision and mission. Central office leaders should provide time to talk through decisions and plans of action. When leaders outline the non-negotiables and seek multiple perspectives on how decisions impact each facet of the organization, a more informed decision can be reached. When decisions are made in this manner, it cultivates system wide ownership. In this way, success and failure are earned as a team.

Central office leaders should consider planning for shared learning and goal setting. When time for these important tasks is done in conjunction with both groups, reciprocal trust flourishes. Shared learning provides a common occasion to be vulnerable and grow together. In collective goal setting, the district leadership team can ensure all are on board toward a common vision and mission.

In addition to work related interaction, central office leaders can initiate regularly scheduled times for central office leaders and principals to interact socially and learn about each other's personal lives. This could involve a regular social gathering outside of the school day, lunch together after meetings, or planned break times during meetings for leaders to converse.

Trust takes time to build. Thus, time must be invested to attain this goal. As systems for building reciprocal trust are created, they need to be assessed regularly to ensure they are effective. If not, input from the entire team should be gathered to make changes.

Recommendations for Principals

The word reciprocal requires that both groups are committing to a trusting relationship equally. Principals must put forth the same amount of effort in building and sustaining reciprocal trust. While the positional power might not make it possible to institute organization wide systems, there are actionable steps for principals.

As communication surfaced through interviews as the most essential component in building trust, principals can communicate regularly with central office leaders on building events. Principals can reach out to engage central office leaders for assistance with problem solving or collaborating in the implementation of a district or building initiative. Principals can

model and engage in honest conversations with central office leaders. Seeking and providing feedback is also a recommended activity.

Whenever possible, principals can invite central office leaders into the school building and engage in communication and collaborative learning opportunities. Principals can be proactive in building their social network and social capital through accessing resources and expertise from central office leaders. Taking the time to seek the perspective of other leaders is invaluable for learning and building reciprocal trust. There is collective expertise in a school district, and seeking out that expertise benefits students and staff.

In terms of joint central office and principal meetings, principals may suggest that they have the opportunity to add to the agenda if that is not already a part of the practices. If it is invited, principals should add to meeting agendas and be active in engaging in instructional conversations. Actively engaging in this two-way communication opportunity will demonstrate the willingness of principal leaders to support initiatives and engage in the process.

With the goal of building relationships, principals should make an effort to participate in activities and events hosted by central office leaders. If this is not a practice in the district, I would recommend that principals plan for such an opportunity or suggest events to central office leaders. Principals in this study sought out those opportunities as a means of building personal and professional ties with colleagues.

Finally, the aspect of a person's leadership style and personality was raised. For that component, the most actionable time to impact this is during the hiring process. Principals are often invited to be a part of the hiring team for central office leaders. In this case, principals can

contribute questions that seek to understand the personality and leadership style of the candidates. Recommendations to the hiring team can include this information.

Recommendations for Certification and Professional Development Programs for School Administrators

Certification and professional development programs for school leaders would do well to place a strong emphasis on the importance of building reciprocal trust within learning organizations. In addition to leadership theory and business case studies, university programs for school administrators should focus on real-world practical examples on how to build trust in organizations. Reviewing case studies of successful districts and inviting in guest speakers who exemplify the practices required to build trust would be valuable to those starting their careers or who are looking to improve in this area.

Additionally, ample time in a program should be spent on the importance of communication and content. School leaders are responsible for effectively communicating with students, parents, community members, staff, other school leaders and potentially state and federal compliance officials. Understanding the nuances of communication and how to use it to leverage trust is something that can be taught. There are many resources available that pinpoint what good communication looks like as well as experts in the field to support this endeavor. As communication is ever evolving with new platforms, social media, and various digital platforms, knowing what, when, to whom, where, and how is required of all school leaders. Specifically teaching what communication looks like between and among school leaders as a component of this will help reciprocal trusting relationships develop.

Effective communicators have systems in place to ensure timely, regular, and pertinent communication is delivered in a manner that those receiving the communication find valuable.

Communication is only as good as ensuring the recipient can access the communication. Programs can emphasize this as important in school leaders learning about the communities in which they work and best practices in developing systems. Systems for central office leaders and principals to engage in two-way communication are vital. Recommendations for how to communicate in joint meetings, electronically, and face to face would help ensure leaders understand effective practices for this between central office administrators and principals.

Finally, school leadership programs need to draw on the research that supports spending time practicing interpersonal skills. While you may not be able to change a personality or disposition, teaching the skills necessary to build trust between leaders is vital. Most educators enter the field understanding how to interact with children as many begin as teachers. Learning how to lead district initiatives and engage adults might not come as naturally. Therefore, adding a social emotional learning component to school leadership programs could positively affect level of trust among adults.

Certification and professional development programs for school leaders have the opportunity to impart essential knowledge and skills to aspiring and current school leaders. Understanding the importance of building reciprocal trust among adults may not be at the forefront of coursework. However, knowing the impact reciprocal trust between adults can have on implementing initiatives for student learning may change that view. Ensuring time is dedicated to this topic is critical to developing educational leaders who have the skills to address the increasing challenges in educating children.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has generated many more questions on the impact of reciprocal trust in school organizations. Existing literature in this area spoke to the importance of reciprocal trusting relationships between central office leaders and principals yet examples that are more pragmatic could be useful for learning organizations to implement effective practices. Implications from the findings have generated several topics that warrant further research. For example seeking the perspectives of central office leaders on what they find to be effective in building reciprocal trust could prove helpful. Also, it is worth exploring practices they have found beneficial to trust-building that principals initiate.

Future research could include a more in-depth case study on a district where the majority of leaders perceive high levels of reciprocal trust in the organization. Also, question was raised by a participant that caused me to wonder about the impact of the size of the district and the strength of trust and social ties. Therefore, it would be beneficial to measure large districts and small districts for comparisons on trust metrics. Researchers could provide beneficial information on how this may look different when the district involves more leaders.

Since the communication piece had such an impact on how principals perceived reciprocal trust, future research could focus on communication tools. More specifically, I found little research on effective practices for video conferencing among school leadership teams. With this method increasing in use, research and training on how to use this tool to build relationships and trust could have a large impact.

This study adds to the limited literature on actual practices school districts can employ to increase the frequency and level of reciprocal trust between principals and central office leaders. While there are many studies on the importance of trust and the positive outcomes when trust

exists, few have examined the actual practices perceived by principals that create that trust. Furthermore, examining trust in situations where there is a hierarchical system in which power dynamics impact the development of reciprocal trusting relationships, provides actionable practices districts can employ.

A Final Reflection on the Study

This dissertation research study examined interorganizational practices that foster reciprocal trust between central office administrators and principals. The focus was on what practices principals perceive as helping to develop this level of trust. Many important findings and implications resulted from this research study. This study demonstrated that principals want to work in a learning organization where reciprocal trusting relationships exist with central office leaders. Initiatives move more quickly, motivation increases, and they feel more effective in their roles when this exists.

Principals recommended several practices. These include systems and collective learning opportunities for central office leaders to enact and recommendations for principal leaders. What might work in one system may not in another, which is why dynamic systems need to be built to grow and sustain reciprocal trust. There is a great amount of collective expertise in a school organization. Building systems to honor and grow the collective efficacy of a learning organization impacts the ability of a school district to implement the growing influx of initiatives and adapt to changes in education over time. This study presents a foundation for others to develop further in implementing practices ensure sufficient levels of reciprocal trust exists between leaders in a school district.

Appendix A: Recruitment e-mails

Dear _____,

My name is Andrea Derdenger. I am currently an elementary school principal in Villa Park District 45. I am a doctoral candidate working on my dissertation through DePaul University.

The purpose of my study is to understand principal perceptions of district practices that help develop reciprocal trust between central office administrators and principals. This study will help prepare future administrators, provide information for current administrators, and allow for principal reflection. My research includes two, one hour-long interviews spaced at least two weeks apart. Interviews can be held in-person or via Zoom depending on your preference. I am writing to ask for your help by agreeing to take part in this study. The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time.

Attached to this email is an electronic version of the consent form for your records.

I appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at 630-699-7085.

Thank you,
Andrea Derdenger

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Executive Summary of Research Proposal

Background of Researcher

I currently serve as the Principal of York Center Elementary School in District 45, and am completing my dissertation at DePaul University. I have held various positions in the field of education for the past 19 years with 10 years in a central office position and 3 years as a principal. I am interested in further exploring the dynamics of the relationships between central office leaders and principals, specifically in relation to practices that develop reciprocal trust between the two.

Contact Information: Andrea Derdenger; aderdenger@gmail.com; (630) 699-7085

Overview of the Research Problem

District-level leaders, play an important role in determining the educational outcomes of students. (Leithwood and Azah, 2017). "Current reform efforts increasingly rely on collaboration of district and site leaders to support alignment and coherence of the reform in multiple settings" (Daly, et. al, 2015). In districts where reciprocal trust is evident, such initiatives flourish and student-learning data indicates greater growth (Lawson, et. al, 2017). However, the roles and connectedness of district-level leaders to building-level leaders can be inconsistent from one district to the next. Given the significant role reciprocal trust plays in the implementation of initiatives to advance learning, further investigation of the actual practices that facilitate the development of reciprocal trusting relationships is needed. While the advancement of student learning is a common goal for district and building level leaders, mechanisms to attain this goal must be explored.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the perceptions of principals regarding the effectiveness of practices contributing to the development of reciprocal trust between principals and district-level school administrators. In reviewing the literature on this topic, the effective reciprocal trust building and collaborative practices will generally be defined as tools used for communication, relationship building and decision-making practices. Additionally, it is possible that the interview will also provide an understanding of the social networks and social capital that exist in school districts.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following overarching research questions:

What practices do principals perceive as contributing to the development of reciprocal trust between principals and district-level leaders?

What tools for communication and decision-making structures contribute to effective collaboration between principals and district level leaders?

What is the lived experience of communication and relational linkages within the context of a reform initiative?

Desired Participants and Data Collection Process

This interview research seeks participants who meet the following criteria:

1. Currently serving as a building principal in a K-8 school in the State of Illinois
2. Building Principal experience of 5 years or more
3. Willing to participate in two, hour-long interview sessions. Interviews can be in-person or via Zoom.

Participation is completely optional and individuals can withdraw at any time without penalty. The interviews will take place in the window from December 2021- February 2022.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

This interview is being audio-recorded for research purposes. If you wish for the recording to stop at any point, please let me know. Do you consent to being audio-recorded? Recording starts now.

Central question:

What practices do principals perceive as contributing to the development of reciprocal trust between principals and district-level leaders?

Sub questions:

Do you perceive the interaction that you have with district-level administrators as contributing to the achievement of students?

What tools for communication contribute to effective collaboration between principals and district level leaders?

What decision-making structures are in place that demonstrate opportunities for collaborative decision-making?

Are there intentional opportunities for relationship building within this leadership team?

Have you experienced meeting structures that lend themselves to building trusting relationships?

How do central office administrators make themselves available to you?

Based on your experiences, what have you seen in place that works?

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