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Building and Maintaining Trust in Small, Rural Northern Alberta Schools
by

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Abstract

Building trust is essential for rural schools to succeed. Relationships based on trust increase communication and decision-making which positively affect school functioning. Trust in relationships is not static, therefore, it takes effort to build and sustain that trust, which is a slow and deliberate process. Trust is fragile and can, if not sustained, break down over time. It can be broken not only by intentional acts, but by unintentional ones as well. Both sides must feel there is a benefit to rebuilding the relationship in order to make the effort to do so. The overall purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how principals in small, rural Northern Alberta schools build and maintain trust with their staffs. A qualitative interview model, drawing on aspects of a grounded theory research paradigm combined with a critical praxis research approach, was used to gain an in-depth description of respondents' views. The analysis of three case studies of principals of small, rural Northern Alberta schools, found principals must act with benevolence, vulnerability, reliability, and competence to build trust. Small, rural school principals must be aware the culture of trust they create with their staff can be affected by the larger community, therefore, they must gain a thorough understanding of the context of their community if they wish to be successful leaders. When trust is perceived as having been broken, it takes time and commitment to restore it.

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Building and Maintaining Trust

As successful leadership of small, rural schools is dependent on relationships (Clarke et al., 2006; Preston & Barnes, 2017), building trust is essential. Trust improves cooperation, encourages openness within a school's culture, and facilitates student achievement (Browning, 2014). Relationships based on trust increase communication and decision-making which positively affects school functioning (Northfield, 2014). Tschannen-Moran (2014) defines trust as "one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent" (pp.19-20).

Kutsyuruba and Walker (2014) discussed these five facets of trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014) as a way of establishing trust in their ecological perspective of trust as a lifecycle. In the beginning of a relationship, trust must be established through a sense of caring (benevolence), reliability, wisdom (competence), honesty, openness, and hope (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2014). Once trust is established, it can be supported by "maintaining confidentiality, consistency, reliability, admitting mistakes, showing respect and care for others, timely and accurate communication, empathy, shared decision-making, conflict resolution, and availability to others" (p. 113).

Northfield (2014) found principals' previous relationships and professional reputation were a factor in their ability to begin building trust. Trust in relationships is not static, therefore, it takes effort to build and sustain that trust, which is a slow and deliberate process. Teachers must also see their principals as competent in their ability to complete leadership tasks in the areas of new role learning, leadership and administration management, and organization and time management skills (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2014; Northfield, 2014; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Browning's (2014) research found "trust is easy to establish in smaller communities because trust is often implicitly built upon the development of personal relationships" (p. 392). However, rural

communities can also be very protective of their schools, as they may be the only social hub for the community (Clarke et al., 2006). It is imperative for incoming principals to take the time to get to know their community by ensuring high visibility and effective communication (Ashton & Duncan, 2013), as "principals who do not actively choose to get to know the community and to fit their work within the rural context may find their efforts short-lived" (p. 4).

Trust is fragile and can, if not sustained, break down over time. It can be broken not only by intentional acts, but by unintentional ones as well. These may include, "betrayal, breach of confidentiality, deception, dishonesty, breach of integrity, corruption, coercion, overuse of power, exclusion of others or divisiveness among staff" (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2014, p. 115). In order to restore trust, both sides must feel there is a benefit to rebuilding the relationship in order to make the effort to do so. The first step in trust restoration is for the violator to acknowledge what they did and then accept responsibility by apologizing and asking for forgiveness. If they are fortunate enough to be forgiven, they should change their ways to ensure that there is not a future breakdown of trust.

Research Question

The primary research question was used to guide this pilot study was:

- How do rural northern principals foster and maintain trust with their staff?

The sub-questions used to guide this pilot study include:

- What characteristics do northern rural principals identify as important with regard to their ability to foster and maintain trusting relationships with their staff?

- How do northern rural principals perceive the maintenance of trusting relationships with their staff to be affected by their relationships with members of the community?

- What is the role of a northern rural principal in restoring trust with staff members when it is perceived as broken?

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how rural northern principals in a Northern Alberta school division foster and maintain trust with their staff. To further this understanding, I attended to three different areas of trusting relationships. First, I sought to gain insight into what characteristics northern rural principals would identify as important to fostering and maintaining trust with their staff. Second, I endeavoured to understand how northern rural principals perceived community relations affecting their ability to develop trusting relationships with their staff. Lastly, I strived to further understand how northern rural principals work to restore trust with their staff when it is perceived as having been broken.

Researcher Assumptions

Prior to data collection, I assumed Tschannen-Moran's (2014) five facets of trust (benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence) would emerge as key factors in the development of trusting relationships with staff, although the exact terminology would differ.

I assumed it would be easier for principals to build trusting relationships with their staff in rural Northern Alberta schools due to the fact "community [is] seamless in the rural contexts; what [is] experienced in the external community translate[s] into feelings about the school and vice versa" (Stelmach & Herrera-Farfan, 2019, p. 6). However, I also assumed community relationships would play a role in the maintenance of trust with staff members because "legacy" parents (who have lived in the community more or less all of their lives) have deeper ties to their community and, therefore, are more invested in what happens within the school (Stelmach & Herrera-Farfan, 2019). Being they have been members of the community all their lives, they are able to exert greater influence within the community.

In regards to the restoration of trust, I assumed I would find evidence of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (1998) four steps violators of trust must take:

1. Recognize and acknowledge that a violation has occurred.

2. Determine the nature of the violation and admit that one has caused the event.

3. Admit that the act was destructive.

4. Accept responsibility for the effects of one's actions. (p. 339)

Literature Review

According to Tschannen-Moran (2014), "there is no way to lead schools successfully without building, establishing, and maintaining trust within and across the many and varied constituencies they serve" (p. ix). Creating a culture of trust within a school leads to many benefits, including greater student achievement, improved organizational adaptability and productivity, teacher well-being, collaboration, cooperation and communication (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Sutherland, 2017; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1997). Principals must earn the trust of stakeholders in their school community if they wish to be successful leaders (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative for school principals to understand how trust is built and how it is sustained.

Tschannen-Moran's (2014) five facets of trust (benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence) are key factors in the development of trusting relationships with staff, although the exact terminology differs. Kutsyuruba and Walker (2014) defined benevolence as a sense of caring, or "the confidence that one's well-being or something one cares about will be protected by the good will of a trusted person" (p. 110). The concept of honesty is centered around a person's character, integrity, and authenticity (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2014; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Tschannen-Moran (2014) defined openness as "a process by which people make themselves vulnerable to others by sharing information, influence, and control" (p. 28). Brown (2018) highlighted the reciprocal nature of vulnerability and trust, stating "we need to trust to be vulnerable, and we need to

be vulnerable in order to build trust" (p. 30). By sharing information, influence, and control, staff become more trusting of their principals and, in turn, principals are more willing to share information, influence, and control. Reliability is the sense one can depend on another to act consistently (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Yet, as Kutsyuruba and Walker (2014) state, "predictability, alone, is insufficient because a person might be consistently malevolent and, therefore, untrustworthy" (p. 110), which is why competence is an important factor in building and maintaining trust. Competence is often defined as the ability to perform a task as expected in accordance with pertinent standards (Tshannen-Moran, 2014; Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2014).

While all of the facets of trust are important for building and sustaining trusting relationships with staff members, their relative influence depends on the nature and vulnerability of each party (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). As Kutsyuruba and Walker (2014) state, "trust is derived from repeated interactions between trustor and trustee (Rousseau et al., 1998), with literally hundreds of moderating or mediating variables that bombard and benefit the state of the relationship" (p. 111). Therefore, a principal must be aware of the needs of each particular relationship and demonstrate the appropriate facet of trust at the appropriate time in order to build and maintain trust with their staff.

In small, rural communities, the school often provides employment opportunities for members of the community and successful rural principals are often active members of the community (Preston & Barnes, 2017). "The effect of strong active stocks of social capital between and among the principal, parents, and community members is directly and indirectly reflected within a rural school environment in the form of community grants, volunteer support, sponsorship, awards, prizes, and various donations" (p. 10).

Stelmach and Herrera-Farfan (2019) also found, "community [is] seamless in the rural contexts; what [is] experienced in the external community translate[s] into feelings about the school and vice

versa" (p. 6). Community relationships play a role in the maintenance of trust with staff members

because "legacy" parents (who have lived in the community more or less all of their lives) have deeper

ties to their community and, therefore, are more invested in what happens within the school (Stelmach &

Herrera-Farfan, 2019). Being they have been members of the community all their lives, they are able to

exert greater influence within the community.

In their research, Stelmach and Herrera-Farfan (2019) drew on McMillan and Chavis' (1986)

four elements of community theory: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and

shared emotional connection. The first element, membership, is a feeling community members belong

within the community. The second element, influence is a feeling among community members that they

have influence over the group and the group has influence over individuals (Stelmach & Herrera-Farfan,

2019). The third element, integration and fulfillment of needs, is reinforcement. McMillan and Chavis

(1986) stated, "for any group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group

association must be rewarding for its members" (p. 12). The last element, shared emotional connection,

is the ability of community members to identify with the community's shared history (McMillan &

Chavis, 1986). In order to develop trust within the community, principals must have an understanding of

the context of the community in which they find themselves a part.

Kutsyuruba and Walker (2014) found "trust in organizations is broken by betrayal, breach of

confidentiality, deception, dishonesty, breach of integrity, corruption, coercion, overuse of power,

exclusion of others or divisiveness among staff" (p. 115). The speed at which trust erodes is dependent

on the magnitude of damage and the perceived intentionality of the act. However, these incidents may be

neutralized if there is an overall sense of trust established (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

When trust is broken, the restoration process must be a two-way process in which both parties

perceive benefits to repairing the relationship (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2014; Tschannen-Moran, 2014;

Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Tschannen-Moran (2014) proposes "four A's of absolution [for the violator]--Admit it, Apologize, Ask for forgiveness, and Amend your ways" (p. 224). This absolution is carried out in the following four steps:

1. Recognize and acknowledge that a violation has occurred.

2. Determine the nature of the violation and admit that one has caused the event.

3. Admit that the act was destructive.

4. Accept responsibility for the effects of one's actions. (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998, p. 339)

The reparation of trust is also facilitated by adopting constructive attitudes and actions, setting clear boundaries, open communication of promises and credible threats, and utilizing effective conflict resolution strategies (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

However, the reparation of trust is not the sole responsibility of the betrayer. The victim must also choose whether or not to repair the relationship. According to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998),

There are then four alternative courses of trust repair to be chosen by the victim. The victim can:

1. Refuse to accept any actions, terms, or conditions for reestablishing the relationship.

2. Acknowledge forgiveness but specify "unreasonable" acts of reparation.

3. Acknowledge forgiveness and specify "reasonable" acts of reparation.

4. Acknowledge forgiveness and indicate that no further acts of reparation are necessary (p. 339).

Method

In this research project, I took a qualitative approach using a grounded theory research paradigm, because I am interested in "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). I combined this

research paradigm with a critical praxis research approach because "being critically aware of identity, context, and purpose is important for pointing us in the right direction and guiding us through the decisions we make as we conduct our research" (Kress, 2011, p. 94). I chose to conduct a case study with three principals as "a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 37). With the overall purpose of my research being to gain an understanding of how principals in small, rural Northern Alberta schools build and maintain trust with their staff, conducting a case study provided an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of trust within schools.

Respondent Group

My initial target respondent group was principals who had lived in their respective communities for three or more years before becoming principals. Of the 21 schools in the division, seven had principals fitting this criteria. I ultimately chose three principals from varying regions of the division to conduct case studies with. The participants were selected based on their years of experience as leaders and their reputations of having good relationships with their staff. At the time of data collection, each participant had been an administrator within the division for at least five years.

Pseudonyms were given to each participant to ensure confidentiality. At the time of data collection, the first participant, dubbed Tim, had been a teaching principal of a K-12 school with fewer than 100 students for twelve years. He had actually began as a computer technician for his current school division for six years before going back to school to complete his education degree. He then taught at another school within the division, approximately 30 minutes away, for six years. When Tim took on the principalship at his current school, there had been several principals in only a few years at the school. At the time this study was conducted, Tim did not live in the community in which he was a principal, but in a small city about 20 minutes away. However, as he had been the principal for over ten years, he was a strong candidate for having built trusting relationships with his staff.

The second participant, referred to as Kate, had only been principal in her K-12 school with fewer than 100 students for two years. However, Kate had grown up in an area within the division, although not in the area where she was principal at the time of data collection. Before becoming the principal at her current school, she had worked in various teaching and leadership roles throughout the division. She had began her career as a teacher in her home town for about six years before moving to a smaller school with a high Indigenous population where she worked as both a teacher and a principal for about five years. She then moved to a larger school within the same division, about three and a half hours away, and worked in teaching and various leadership roles for about four years. She had also recently (within the last few months) moved to the town where she was principal and prior to that, she had lived in a town about an hour away and was commuting every day.

The third participant, designated Polly, had been principal of her K-12 school with fewer than 150 students for more than 10 years, enabling her to have had the time to build trusting relationships with her staff. Polly, like Tim, did not live in the community where she was principal, but lived about 15 minutes away in another town. Like Kate, Polly had grown up in the town where she was residing and as the two towns are only 15 minutes apart, the communities are relatively familiar with each other and many residents knew her when she was younger. Polly began her career teaching within a different school division, in a small town approximately 700 kilometers away from where she was currently employed as principal. After about six years, she moved to her current residence and after taking some maternity leave time, she began teaching at the school where she is currently principal. She taught for approximately three years before taking on the role of vice principal and, eventually, principal.

All respondents were initially contacted via email with a brief introduction of my research topic and participant information letter (see Appendix A) attached for them to review. Once they agreed to participate, I emailed them electronic copies of a consent form (see Appendix B).

Data Collection

Data were collected by performing semi-structured interviews with each principal "so some standardized information [was] obtained, some of the same open-ended questions [were] asked of all participants, and some time [was] spent in a [semi-]structured mode so that fresh insights and new information [could] emerge" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). The purpose of the interview questions (see Appendix C) was to gain an understanding of each participant's perception of how they foster and maintain trusting relationships with their staff. Each interview was recorded using Google Meet and initially transcribed using Scribbl. I then compared the Scribbl transcriptions to the Google Meet videos and made the necessary adjustments, including the use of pseudonyms for each respondent.

Data Analysis

Following each of the three semi-structured interviews conducted, the interview transcripts were analyzed and coded, deductively and inductively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), into conceptual and thematic categories. The process of analysis began with a comparison of the data emerging from the first interview transcript to what was already known about trust, particularly in relation to Tschannen-Moran's (2014) five facets of trust: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competency. This provided a conceptual framework to categorize the initial data and interpret it based on the current understanding held about how trust is built. However, new themes started to emerge, particularly the importance of dedication and commitment.

The data were analyzed a second time, following Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) recommendations. In relation to the purpose of the study, the data was coded based on the area of trust it pertained to. The findings were then cross-referenced in those areas to the emergent themes in each of the facets of trust previously identified. The second interview was conducted and coded in the same way - first in relation to previous research and knowledge and then based on the area of trust it pertained to.

What began to emerge was a difference in the importance of the different facets of trust between the two respondents.

A constructivist approach to the data was taken, "focusing on how people construct knowledge or make meaning" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 208). This led to the understanding that while there may be different facets required to foster and maintain trusting relationships, the emphasis individuals place on those facets may differ significantly, which may in turn affect their ability to develop trusting relationships. During the final interview, the follow-up questions asked were more directed at which qualities (or characteristics) the respondent emphasized as being more important to fostering and maintaining trusting relationships with their staff.

Trustworthiness

In an effort to strengthen the credibility of the study, a variety of methods were used to ensure accurate representation of participant views. First and foremost, information regarding the nature of the study and expectations of respondents in the form of an introduction letter (see Appendix A) was emailed to participants to ensure understanding. Consent was received from all research participants and the interview questions were emailed to respondents at least 24 hours prior to conducting the interview. The interviews were conducted using Google Meet, which allowed for them to be recorded and the digital transcription service, Scribbl, was utilized. Following each interview, the transcripts were compared to the recordings to ensure documentation of words spoken verbatim. I conducted a member check (Guba, 1981) by sending transcripts and summaries of my understandings to the respondents for verification. Verbal conversations were used to verify understandings from the data, and the final written paper was sent to respondents for review prior to submission.

Limitations

While every effort was made to ensure this research was reliable, valid and trustworthy, there were some limitations. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, "maximum variation in the sample, whether it be the sites selected for a study or the participants interviewed, allows for the possibility of a greater range of application by readers or consumers of the research" (p. 257). As this particular study is limited to three participants, all of whom were principals within the same school division at the time of data collection, future research could include a greater demographical range of participants. In an attempt to increase potential transferability, a "highly descriptive, detailed presentation" (p. 257) of each participant was provided.

Another limitation was the fact I was not a principal at the time of data collection. I was, however, employed in a divisional leadership position, which limited my understanding of the context of school-based leadership. While I attempted to view all of the data through the lens of a principal as I was enrolled in a Master of Education in Educational Administration and Leadership program, I lacked actual experience in that role.

Findings and Discussion

Throughout the data analysis and literature review process, the following themes were identified: Important Characteristics for Fostering and Maintaining Trust, Impact of Community Perceptions on Trusting Relationships with Staff, and Requirements for Rebuilding Trust. Through the data analysis and review of relevant literature, the following characteristics emerged as important for administrators when fostering and maintaining trust with their staff: benevolence, vulnerability, reliability, and competence. In terms of community perceptions, the respondents seemed to perceive the more they were accepted and trusted within their respective communities, the stronger trust they perceived their school staff to

have in them. Lastly, the most important requirement for moving past betrayal identified by respondents was the acceptance of others' differences.

Important Characteristics for Fostering and Maintaining Trust

While there are several characteristics important for fostering and maintaining trusting relationships with staff, the following emerged as the most important to respondents in this study: benevolence, vulnerability, reliability, and competence. Benevolence was most often demonstrated through informal conversations in which the principals discussed staff members' personal lives. Vulnerability was deemed an essential characteristic of building trust as a way principals' demonstrate their true selves. The principals in this study discussed the importance of being reliable so staff would know what to expect. Respondents also valued competence, particularly in their understanding of the context of their respective local communities.

Benevolence

All of the principals interviewed felt demonstrating benevolence was an important factor in developing trusting relationships with their staff. In Tim's situation, there had been a revolving door of principals at the school before he took on the position. He discussed the need to display dedication to his school and his staff through endeavours such as reevaluating the school's mission and vision (Line 75), having breakfast together as a staff (Line 207), and socializing together (Line 220). He stated, "it was about showing my staff, no, I'm not going to leave in a year, or two" (Lines 70-71). Exhibiting dedication is particularly important in small, rural schools as the rest of the staff is often constant and may feel they can wait out their principals, which leads to improvements being short-lived and episodic (Clarke & Stevens, 2009). Kate also felt eating lunch with her staff (Line 608) and making an attempt to have conversations with her staff every day (Line 605) were important to developing relationships because "in a small school being involved in personal lives is part of being a good leader" (Lines

847-848). Informal conversations are a way for principals to demonstrate genuine care for teachers' well-being, which is essential for building trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). "People-focused leadership not only generates self-pride and job satisfaction for teachers, but supports a teacher's personal well-being" (Preston & Barnes, 2017, pp. 8-9).

Vulnerability

Tschannen-Moran (2014) uses the terms "honesty" and "openness" and while all of the respondents discussed the need for open communication, true openness and honesty cannot happen without vulnerability (Brown, 2018). Brown (2018) defined vulnerability as "the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 19) and states "we need to be vulnerable in order to build trust" (p. 30).

> During the interview with Tim, he said,
>
> Learning is a very … intimate exercise because when you are truly learning something … you have to be in an environment where you're taking risks because you're going to make mistakes and feel that you're not going to be negatively impacted by that failure. So you have to be able to make a mistake and trust that, that person is going to be there to get you back on track. (Lines 164-169)

In the beginning stages of building trust, both parties are learning about each other. The very essence of building trust requires vulnerability and without vulnerability, trust cannot be built (Brown, 2018). Kate echoed this sentiment during her interview when she said vulnerability is an essential quality necessary to build and maintain trust with your staff "because they need to know that we're real and that we have faults, but that we can learn from them and grow as a group" (Lines 557-558). Browning (2014) found, "a leader's willingness to display his/her vulnerabilities, both personally and professionally, engendered staff's admiration and trust" (p. 397).

Reliability

As Tschannen-Moran (2014) found, "consistency among the beliefs a school leader espouses, school goals, and actual behavior promotes trust in that individual" (p. 35). This was reiterated by Kate during her interview,

> [My staff] need to know that when I make a decision, I stick to it. They need to know that I'm not going to favour one over another … and just making sure that any rules that I enforce … are done as consistently as possible. (Lines 585-590)

According to Kate, demonstrating consistency makes delegating easier because others know what to expect and, in turn, this develops a sense of team with her staff.

Handford and Leithwood (2013) caution being reliable, in and of itself, is not enough. Rather, "reliability needs to be associated with actions leading to some outcome desired on the part of those potential trustors for those trustors to attribute trustworthiness" (p. 197). Therefore, principals must use discretion to ensure they are not reliable in pursuing their own interests. Polly echoed this sentiment when she stated, "I want to know that I can depend on my leader. I want to know that my leader's not going to ask me to do something that they're not also willing to do" (Lines 279-281). She discussed the need for principals to be willing to be team players because "you can't expect people to step up and do all these extra jobs if you're not prepared to put in that time as well" (Lines 350-351).

Competence

Teachers are more willing to trust their principal if their principal demonstrates competence (Combs, 2015). According to Cranston (2018), "seeming competent has to do with their belief in your ability to perform the tasks required by your formal leadership position" (p. 92). When Kate took on her first principalship, she

had a very strong understanding of the context that [they] were working under and the

community … was going through a very major transition … They needed someone in a

leadership role there that understood the context … who could bridge the relationships (Lines

355-373)

Kate identified her understanding of her small community as the piece that helped her build trust with

her staff.

Impact of Community Perceptions on Trusting Relationships with Staff

When rural principals are seen as active community members, it enhances the development of

trust with school staff (Preston & Barnes, 2017). With Tim, by "going out into the community, going to

sporting events, having people come in and just having conversations with people" (Lines 125-126), "it

showed to them that [he] had a vested interest not only just in the school, but in the continued success of

the community" (Lines 265-267). Many small, rural schools often provide employment opportunities for

local community members (Preston & Barnes, 2017), as was the case for Tim. His demonstrated

commitment to getting to know members of the community outside of the school strengthened their trust

in him. Formal and informal conversations can aid rural principals in gaining knowledge, trust, and

credibility within tight-knit, rural communities (Ashton & Duncan, 2013).

Tschannen-Moran (2014) found, "stronger initial trust based on the good reputations of the

parties involved may, in turn, lead to a stronger motivation for trustworthy behavior to sustain and build

on the benefits of that trust" (pp. 51-52). Kate and Polly both identified their reputations as an important

factor in the initial establishment of trust with their staff. Kate recalled, "there was enough people out

there that were saying things like, "it'll be good" [and] "you guys are going to like her" … [so] there

was a sense that I was an okay person" (Lines 470-472). Polly was raised in a community close to where

she currently works. Given the close proximity of the towns, when community members found out she

was from the area, she felt it helped her to become accepted more quickly. She said, "I think it just naturally happens that people start building 'who are you?' and then … there's an implicit trust with that" (Lines 600-601).

It is also important for principals, particularly those of rural schools, to find a balance between community engagement and maintaining a professional distance (Clarke & Stevens, 2009). Kate discussed the need for setting boundaries, such as not providing community members with access to her personal cell phone number and being cognizant of friendships within the community. As different members of the community were friends with different teaching staff, Kate recognized the influence her conversations with community members would have on her relationships with her staff.

Requirements for Rebuilding Trust

According to Kutsyuruba and Walker (2014), "Galford and Drapeau (2002) suggested that trust can be repaired through recognition of the loss of trust, examination of the breach and damages, communication, acknowledgement of the impact, identification of trust-rebuilding steps and reflection" (p. 117). Amid the interview with Tim, he recounted an experience when he left his current position as principal and took on an administrative position at another school in the division for a year. While he was away from the school, the staff did not have the same level of trust with the new administrator hired to replace him. At the end of the year, he decided to return to the school, but he expressed the perception of his staff feeling betrayed. He noted, "betrayal of trust, whether it's intentional or, in this case, perceived or unintentional, you have to be committed to fixing it, and I was" (Lines 339-340). His recognition of the perceived abandonment of his staff and his dedicated commitment to the school helped him to repair the trust with his staff, although he feels it took a considerable amount of time.

Both Kate and Polly had, what they perceived to be, more mild betrayals of trust. They both spoke of the importance of directly talking about the situation to recognize it as a betrayal and

acknowledge the impact the situation had on their respective staff as well as themselves. As Tschannen-Moran (2014) found, "trust repair is a two-way process in which each side must perceive that the short-term or long-term benefits to be gained from the relationship are sufficiently valued to be worth the investment of time and energy required by the repair process" (p. 224). Polly reiterated the importance of time and "of consistency of reassurance, of conversations and active show of support toward that teacher and for that teacher" (Lines 661-663). Kate felt the key to moving past betrayal was "com[ing] to an understanding that both of us had this behaviour and we were just [going to] …coexist" (Lines 765-772). She recognized the value of simply accepting each other for who you are.

Summary

The principals in this study identified four important characteristics for building and maintaining trust with their staff. Respondents felt it was important to demonstrate genuine caring and benevolence by taking an interest in staff members' personal lives through informal conversations. Tim and Kate both felt trust could not be built and sustained without vulnerability because learning is an intimate exercise enabling the demonstration of authenticity. The principals interviewed also identified the importance of demonstrating competence in their understanding of the effect community context has on their schools.

Respondents discussed the need for principals of small, rural schools to be seen as active community members as often these schools employ members of the local community. The staff members residing in the local community are more willing to trust a principal who cares about their community. Reputations also played a factor in trust development, particularly in the initial stages, as both Kate and Polly were from the area, their reputations provided an initial foundation of trust.

When considering betrayal of trust, all respondents identified the perception of betrayal as the factor determining whether trust was broken or not. If a staff member perceived they had been betrayed,

the principals all felt they had to demonstrate commitment to restoring trust. At the same time, they identified the importance of the person affected by the betrayal to also want to repair the relationship.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As Adams et al. (2019) stated, "developing an environment where leaders trust staff, and staff trust leaders, is crucial. Trusting relationships lead directly to people being confident in each other and their abilities to try new and innovative ways to impact students' learning" (p. 33). They are more willing to collaborate with their colleagues and learn from their experiences. The culture of trust that a leader creates with their teachers affects the entire school community and, consequently, the way the outside community views the school.

Important Characteristics for Fostering and Maintaining Trust

To build a culture of trust within a small, rural school, principals must act with benevolence, vulnerability, reliability, and competence. In this particular study, participants referenced informal conversations, often during shared meals, with their staff as the most common way to demonstrate benevolence. Taking a personal interest in staff members' lives illustrated their genuine caring and assisted with the development of trusting relationships. They also highlighted the importance of displaying dedication to the community so staff feel you are committed to the school. Principals who are new to their role would benefit from having informal conversations with their staff, particularly if they show a genuine interest in the personal lives of their staff members.

Participants also spoke of the need to be vulnerable to create an environment where teachers feel empowered to take risks without penalty. Principals should not be afraid to show their vulnerability, but rather embrace it, to disclose their authentic selves. Trust cannot be built without vulnerability (Brown, 2018). Principals may demonstrate their vulnerability through their willingness to take risks, make

mistakes, and guiding others to do the same; and ensuring there is no punishment for them if their risk does not have a positive outcome.

Reliability and consistency are also important facets of building trusting relationships. When staff know what to expect, it makes delegating tasks and distributing leadership easier. However, it is also important for principals to ensure they are not reliably acting untrustworthy. Participants in this study emphasized the importance of demonstrating willingness to do any task you are asking of staff. Principals wanting to build trusting relationships with their staff would benefit from demonstrating consistent choices in which the best interests of the students are always paramount.

Impact of Community Perceptions on Trusting Relationships with Staff

Competency in small, rural schools was demonstrated through knowledge and understanding of community values and context. Participants in this study discussed the importance of building relationships within the outside community to enhance their ability to develop trusting relationships with the staff in their schools. As the school often employs members of the community, rural principals should make an effort to be seen as active members of the community. Stelmach and Herrera-Farfan (2019) found, "community was seamless in the rural contexts; what was experienced in the external community translated into feelings about the school and vice versa" (p. 6). Principals of small, rural schools should make an effort to be seen in the local community and attend local events. They should not shy away from informal conversations outside of the school.

Requirements for Rebuilding Trust

The perception of broken trust requires both parties to make a commitment to restore the relationship (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Participants in this study highlighted the need to be committed to fixing relationships as restoring broken trust takes time to accept each other for who they are. Principals who find themselves in a situation where trust is perceived as being broken can begin to repair the

relationship by acknowledging the betrayal and pledging their commitment to the reparation of the relationship. However, they must also be accepting of the victims' feelings and willing to accept the victim's choice of whether to (and in some cases, how to) repair trust.

Future Research

Further research is required to determine which, if any, facets of trust are deemed more important than others. Each participant spoke more in depth about one particular facet of trust, but all participants seemed to favour a different characteristic of building trust. As well, how do these facets of trust work together to develop relationships? Are they progressive and build on one another in a way that one facet becomes more important after another one has been established? Or is it more effective to utilize all facets at the same time? As the context of this study was within small, rural communities, further research could be conducted to determine if there are certain facets of trust deemed to be more beneficial to building relationships within these tighter-knit communities, versus more urban settings.

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Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

<mark>Letter of Introduction - Individual Interview - Adult Participant</mark>

Jessica Whelan
Graduate Student
Educational Policy Studies
Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3
780.834.8761
whelanj@prsd.ab.ca

January 24, 2022

Recipient Name
Recipient City, Province Postal Code

Dear ‹Recipient Name›,

I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Educational Policy Studies program at the University of Alberta. The purpose of this letter is to request your participation in a research assignment for my EDPS 509 Research Design and Data Analysis course. My assignment is intended to identify ways in which northern rural principals foster and maintain trust with their staff. Your participation would involve a one-hour interview conducted via Google Meet to discuss the ways in which you foster and maintain trusting relationships with your staff. The interview questions will be emailed to you at least 24 hours prior to our interview time to allow you an opportunity to view them ahead of time. Your participation is voluntary; there will be no consequence to you should you decline to participate or decide to withdraw from participating.

In order to gather data for my research assignment, I will collect interview data and then code it deductively and inductively for emergent themes. The interview will be video recorded and transcribed. Please note:

- You may choose not to answer any question.
- You may opt out of this research assignment once responses have been submitted. To do so, please submit your request by email by March 31, 2022, and I will destroy all data.

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- I will send you a transcription of the interview as well as a summary of the main points I understood you to make by email; you will have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcription and my interpretation of it.

Should any concerns, complaints, or questions arise from your participation, you may contact me or my instructor, Dr. Jose da Costa (jdacosta@ualberta.ca).

All data will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants:

- Participant names will not be revealed. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used in all written representations of the data.
- Hard copy data will be locked in my file cabinet at my office and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Digital data will be stored on my computer under a secure password-protected system and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Data will be used to complete my EDPS 509 course, my graduate program, and may be used in future presentations and publications in educational contexts.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate in my research. If you wish to participate, please sign the attached consent form and return it via email by February 1, 2022. I have included two copies of the consent form: one is to be signed by you and the other is for your own records.

The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, you can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Should you wish to receive a copy of my research findings, I would be pleased to provide one at your request.

Sincerely,

Jessica Whelan
Graduate student in the Master of Education in Educational Policy Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
(780)834-8761
whelanj@prsd.ab.ca

University of Alberta Ethics ID# Pro00096710

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Appendix B

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

<mark>Adult Participant Consent Form</mark>

EDPS 509 Research Assignment: How Rural Northern Principals Foster and Maintain Trust With Their Staff

Researcher: Jessica Whelan

Date Range of Research: February 1, 2022 - February 28, 2022

I, _____ (name of participant), hereby consent to participate in the research, How Rural Northern Principals Foster and Maintain Trust With Their Staff.

I understand that my participation includes:

- a one-hour recorded interview via Google Meet with Jessica Whelan

As per the Letter of Information, I understand that:

- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- I may withdraw from the research without penalty until March 31, 2022.
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially.
- No identifying information will appear on written representations of the data: pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used to convey the data.
- The data will be used for the purposes of completion of the Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program and may be used in future presentations and publications in the educational context.
- The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, I can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

University of Alberta Ethics ID# Pro00096710

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Appendix C

Interview Schedule

*Please note that these are the initial interview questions and are subject to change as research is conducted. As well, there may be additional questions asked as follow-up questions to these to clarify responses and information from participants.

1. How long have you lived in the community you are currently working in?

    a. Why did you choose to move there?

    b. How many years of teaching experience did you have prior to taking on your leadership role?

2. What do you perceive to be essential qualities necessary to maintain trust with your staff?

    a. Why do you believe these qualities are essential for maintaining trust with your staff?

3. What day-to-day activities are you involved in that ensure continuing trust with your staff?

    a. Why do you do those particular activities?

4. How is the maintenance of trust with your staff affected by your relationships within the community?

5. Talk about a time when your actions caused a staff member to feel betrayed. What did you do to try to repair their trust in you?

6. What strategies or approaches would you like to be doing with your staff to help maintain the trusting relationships you have built with them?

    a. What is preventing you from implementing them?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?