Research Article

Superintendent Trustworthiness: Elementary School Principals'Experiences and Perceptions

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Abstract

While teachers' trust in principals is the most commonly studied trust relationship between and among school stakeholders, left largely unexplored is trust between leaders within a school system. Findings presented answer the question: What are indicators of superintendent trustworthiness as experienced and perceived by elementary school principals? Four broad themes were found to capture superintendent characteristics relating to trustworthiness: 1) the nature and strength of a superintendent's support; 2) the extent to and ways in which a superintendent engenders a sense of autonomy in a principal's school-level leadership; 3) a superintendent's presence in the work of the principal and the principal's school; and 4) a superintendent's openness. Principals' perspectives of the role of superintendent trustworthiness in their school leadership is explored.

Keywords

trustworthiness, superintendent leadership, elementary school principals, principal-superintendent relationship, educational leadership

Prior investigation has brought to our attention the important role that matters of trust hold between and among school stakeholders. The extant literature provides strong evidence that teachers' trust in a school principal has a positive impact upon such things as student achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), school climate (Tarter et al., 1989), collaboration among teachers (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), collective teacher efficacy (Goodard et al., 2000), organizational citizenship (Tschannen-Moran, 2003), shared decision making (Forsyth et al., 2011), school mindfulness (Hoy et al., 2006), and school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth et al., 2011).

Sergiovanni (2005) points out that trust is "the tie that binds roles together and allows for the creation of role sets that embody reciprocal obligations" (p. 117).

While teachers' trust in principals is the most frequently studied trust relationship in schools (Forsyth et al., 2011; Schmidt, 2010), less is understood about the nature and role of trust between and among educational leaders (Samier, 2010).

Notions of *trustworthiness* are, unsurprisingly, frequently intertwined in writings on *trust* (Hardin, 2002; Samier, 2010). In this study, trustworthiness includes perceived characteristics (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), behaviors (Rodgers, 2010), and interpretation of intention (Mayer, et al., 1995). In this way, "one's perception of another's trustworthiness—whether through cognitive or affective processes, or a combination of both—serves as grounds for one to grant trust to another" (Benna & Hambacher, in press, p. 3).

The relationship between principal and superintendent is an asymmetrical but critical relationship. In most school districts, principals and the superintendent form a relationship team in which the goals of the school district are pursued in collaboration across schools and upward with the school district personnel (West and Derrington, 2009).

Because of the hierarchical nature of relationships within schools, it is the responsibility of the person with the greatest power to take the initiative and build and sustain trusting relationships (Kochanek, 2005). Kouzes and Posner (1995) further note that the "leader's behavior is more critical than that of any other person in determining the level of trust that develops in a group" (p. 166).

For a school to experience the benefits of a trusting culture, principals hold the responsibility to build and sustain trusting relationships (Whitener, et al., 1998). This study posits the same is true for the broader context of a school district—for a district to experience the benefits of a trusting culture, superintendents hold the responsibility to build and sustain trusting relationships.

Building on the assertion that trust is valueless without trustworthiness (Baier, 1996; Hardin, 2002), reported here are the findings to one question embedded in a broader investigation of ways in which principals make sense of superintendent trustworthiness: *What are indicators of superintendent trustworthiness as experienced and perceived by elementary school principals?*

Research Design

The research design for this qualitative inquiry included purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998), data collection through in-depth interviews

(Seidman, 2006), and data analysis shaped by constructivist grounded theory guidelines (Charmaz, 2014).

Purposeful sampling

Criteria were delineated to frame the study and identify a purposeful sample across the population of principals in one New England state: 1) the participants recruited and selected were public elementary school principals with sixth grade as an upper limit of grade level, and 2) the participants selected had worked under the direct supervision of more than one superintendent. Using databases publicly available through the state's Department of Education, I generated a list of possible participants.

With the exception of known colleagues, I sent e-mails of invitation to participate in the study to all elementary principals in the state who I anticipated could meet the identified criteria. Twelve principals responded to my invitation, and I arranged a time to meet with each to determine if they met participation criteria, to review the purpose and steps of the study, and to answer questions they had about the study. Five of these principals met the criteria and joined me in exploring the research question. It is important to note that given the sample size, the study findings are not fully generalizable. Nonetheless, the findings do offer valuable insight into the nature and role of trust.

The principals of this study led schools in different school districts ranging from small rural to large suburban settings across all regions of the state. None of them had worked with common referent superintendents. Table 1 presents a cursory introduction to the participants.

Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Number of Years as Principal	Number of Principalships	Number of Superintendents
Michaela	16	4	5
Jan	3	1	2
Carol	9	3	3
James	12	2	4
Fred	15	1	6

Data collection

Each principal and I engaged in three semi-structured interviews spaced approximately one week apart. The interviews followed Seidman's (2006) protocol for phenomenological in-depth interviewing which aims to "understand the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). While interviewing, however, I remained open to explore responses and emergent themes in greater depth. Each interview was recorded and

transcribed verbatim and I used pseudonyms to protect the participants' confidentiality.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed constructivist grounded theory guidelines (Charmaz, 2014). In approaching data analysis, I remained mindful the recommendation of Strauss and Corbin (1990): "do not be so steeped in the literature as to be constrained and even stifled in creative efforts by our use of it" (p. 50).

While Tschannen-Moran's (2004) five facets of trust—benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness—were utilized as sensitizing concepts, they were not used as a priori codes because I wanted the codes to emerge from the participants' own words.

I coded the data from incident-to-incident in the initial cycle of analysis (Charmaz, 2014). I inductively generated descriptive codes when appropriate, however I focused on: 1) In Vivo coding to honor the voices of the participants, and 2) on the use of gerunds to preserve action.

I then conducted a second cycle of analysis—focused coding—to categorize the data and to identify the most salient codes to generate emergent themes (Charmaz, 2014). For example, the initial codes "quickly returning call" (a gerund code) and "There when I needed her," (an In Vivo code) were indicative of ways principals made sense of superintendent trustworthiness. Along with other initial codes, these examples were organized conceptually under the larger focused code: "availability."

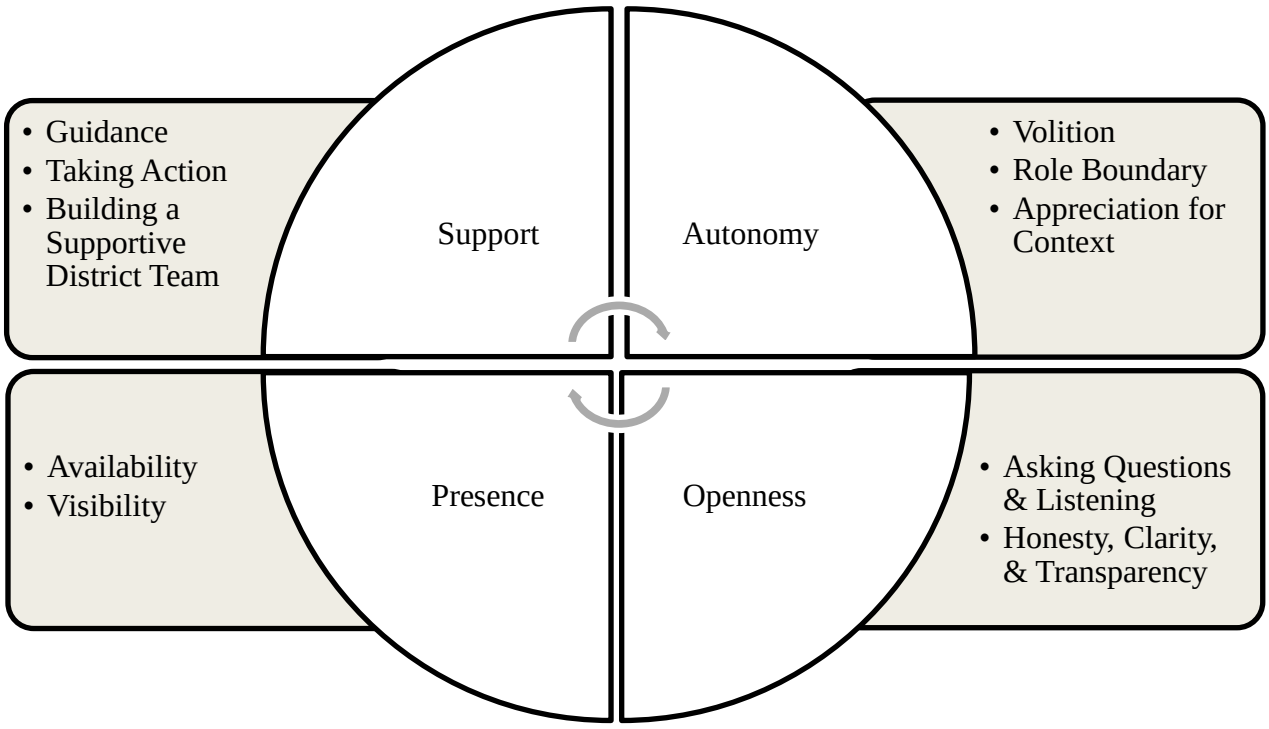
Ten focused codes were organized into four core themes and identified, for the principals of this study, as Indicators of Superintendent Trustworthiness.

Findings

Four broad, interrelated, and recurring themes—what I am calling "Indicators of Superintendent Trustworthiness"—emerged from the data. For the principals in this study, perceptions of superintendent trustworthiness are predicated on demonstrations and discernment of: 1) the nature and strength of a superintendent's *support;* 2) the extent to and ways in which a superintendent engenders a sense of principal's sense of *autonomy* in school-level leadership, 3) a superintendent's *presence* in the work of the principal and their school as well as "being there in that moment," and 4) a superintendent's *openness* with the principals and with the broader school community. Figure 1 identifies the Indicators and briefly illuminates each core theme with sub-categorical themes.

Figure 1

Indicators of Superintendent Trustworthiness



While the Indicators are represented separately, I emphasize that they were found to be interrelated and overlapping with one another and at times contradictory to one another. *Support*, for example, stands juxtaposed and in tension with *autonomy*.

Superintendent support promotes a sense of superintendent trustworthiness only to the extent to which the perception of support does not violate principal autonomy. Carol got to the heart of the connection between support and autonomy commenting upon perceptions of trustworthiness in superintendents who "provide lots of space for me to lead the way I feel like is my style, but with lots of support if need be."

As expressed by the participants, each of the Indicators and exemplars have an inherent range. "Taking action," for example, can contrast with "not taking action." Depending upon a principal's interpretation, this might engender *or* detract from perceptions

of trustworthiness. Principals' interpretations are situational—while in one moment taking an action (e.g., providing reinforcement or protection) may be interpreted as superintendent support, in another moment the same action might be interpreted as diminishing a principal's sense of autonomy.

Furthermore, the principals of this study referred both directly and inferentially that their understanding of trust includes a reciprocity that either strengthens or diminishes their perceptions of superintendent trustworthiness.

Michaela noted, "If trust doesn't go both directions, it's not a true trusting relationship." Jan suggested, quite simply, "You have to give some to get some."

The following subsections elaborate upon each of the Indicators. While they are identified separately for the purposes of description and presentation, it is important to note that there is overlap as the Indicators frequently interact with one another—shaping and influencing principals' perception of superintendent trustworthiness. I aim to illustrate this overlap through the examples and voices of participants.

Support

Support denotes ways in which principals perceive and experience superintendent leadership that enhances and reinforces the principals' own school leadership. Support was found to be characterized by the three roles or courses of action: 1) providing guidance, 2) taking action, and 3) building a supportive district team.

Guidance

The principals of this study referred frequently to guidance—a particular kind of support whereby superintendents offered suggestions, answered questions, or helped generate options for the principals as they navigated the problems, opportunities, and projects of school leadership. Regardless of the principal's years of experience in the role, perceptions of the guidance superintendents provide were dependent upon principals' impression of a superintendent's competence. Whether sought by principals or shared by superintendents without request, there was a threshold of guidance that once reached, became understood by principals as a directive.

In turn, the directive was understood by principals as a superintendent's expected course of action and that they—happily, begrudgingly, or somewhere in between—lost, or to some extent relinquished, their own agency in determining a course of action. This threshold varied across the participants and their superintendents; however, once the threshold was crossed, they perceived superintendents as being directive and those directives may or may not have been welcomed.

Both James and Michaela related experiences of school employee supervision and the guidance offered/provided by their superintendents. These examples help to demonstrate a fine line and a point of tension between the way that principals look for superintendent guidance and how this pushes up against instances where a perceived need for support is met with superintendent directives. The concern for principals is not necessarily whether superintendents have the authority to issue directives, but rather, fits within a broader power dynamic where in a search for autonomy principals seeks distinctness.

James acknowledged his frequent frustration with one superintendent, characterizing him as controlling and directive. Such an approach to educational leadership

conflicted with James's own vision and values of school leadership.

James recognized, however, that in seeking and following through with this superintendent's guidance, he could achieve the intended, and in his opinion, necessary outcome of terminating an ineffective teacher:

> His level of control was do it his way and he'll support you. Don't do it his way and he'll tell you, 'You didn't do it my way'. For example, the teacher who we ended up firing … We sat down and I just said to him, 'Tell me what you want me to do.' He told me, I did it, and he fired her. We both got what we wanted.

Michaela noted that perceptions of one superintendent's trustworthiness were in part shaped by his competence and guidance; she shared an example of where she was struggling with "some really difficult custodial issues" and what her superintendent offered to her:

> The follow through of what needed to happen and his thoughtful thinking behind the steps I needed to take … He was just making sure that the plan was effective, meaningful, and going to potentially have a lasting effect. I wasn't just gonna hang out there with this individual.

While James perceived his request for guidance as simply the most effective way to achieve an end, Michaela perceived her request for guidance as one of support to resolve a problem.

On Michaela's account, her superintendent's guidance prompted growth in her problem-solving skillset, and furthermore, his support indicated trustworthiness in his attention to Michaela's vulnerability in the situation and his willingness to take action to help.

Taking action

The principals in this study perceived trustworthiness when their superintendents acted to support them by either mitigating or taking control of a situation. The principals interpreted such superintendent action as: 1) reinforcing the principal's decisions or courses of action, and/or 2) protecting them from potential negative consequences.

Michaela shared an experience of a superintendent who did not take any action in a moment when Michaela perceived that she needed the additional authoritative leverage inherent in the superintendent's role to resolve a personnel problem.

Michaela spoke with exasperation about an incident involving a custodian who was not following through with identified job responsibilities and clear directives she had given him. She was confused and surprised by the superintendent's inaction when she pleaded for support in addressing the issue and help in resolving the problem.

> You just couldn't turn a blind eye to the custodian. He wasn't cleaning. Like if people would poop on the bathroom floors or whatever, he would just lock the bathroom up. He wouldn't put salt down on sidewalks in the winter. had people fall and crack their heads. Weird things like that—one thing after another. So, I'm thinking, 'This is an easy one.' I can just remember the night I called my superintendent. 'I need your help!' and I can remember him going off on me like, 'This is your school and this is your job and you need to deal with it.' I'm like, 'Okay. I've tried.'

On Michaela's account, the superintendent failed to reinforce the course of action she was taking to protect the wellbeing of the school community and only further deepened Michaela's sense of vulnerability and distrust.

Building a supportive district team

The administrative team a superintendent builds at the district level and the extent to which this team is perceived to assist principals emerged as another kind of superintendent support.

James, for example, pointed out, the district-level team is "our support system. They help us navigate the law, they help us navigate state requirements, they help us navigate curriculum, because they can pull lots of people together or they can bring in people to support us."

Michaela also heighted her impression of how a superintendent "built such a great team" noting:

> I would say that the role of support from the district has continued to just get stronger, and again I think it's with the hiring of just more and more amazing individuals… Whether it's the bus liaison or whatever, our superintendent has been very clear with everybody that their role is to allow principals to do what they need to do, which in turn is do what's needed for kids.

Autonomy

Autonomy includes ways in which superintendents make room for principal leadership that includes volition, role boundaries, and validations of a school's unique context.

For the principals of this study, superintendents are perceived to be trustworthy when they provide a balance of support to a principal while also respecting a principal's need for some freedom to enact building level leadership. A superintendent who strikes this balance sends a powerful message to a principal—that the principal is trusted.

Volition

Principals emphasized a desire to have a sense of control in their own leadership practice, and their perceptions of superintendent trustworthiness were enhanced when superintendents made the space available for the principals to practice self-determination in their school leadership.

James shared: "If a superintendent's approach is philosophical, big picture, direction-setting, and inclusive in conversation then it works. But not if someone is an authoritarian, 'This is how we're going to do it. It's your job to make it work.' Reflecting upon his time working with one superintendent he noted: "I think a lot of my work with her was satisfying because I could experiment with my thinking and my staff's thinking without doing it her way or the same way somebody else did."

Similarly, Carol spoke of her experiences with another superintendent:

> I really felt like there was a lot of space for me to do what I needed to do to get my bearings, learn about the school, learn about the staff and he was pretty much fine with all of that. It was sort of like, 'If you feel like you're good, then go ahead–but if you feel like you need any support let me know.' I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven. I was like, 'What could be better than that kind of supervision?' where I really can try out my leadership role but

always know that I had that support if I needed it.

Role boundary

Closely related to perceptions of volition, role boundary refers to principals' perceptions of the specific job responsibilities of superintendents and principals and how they relate to one another. This includes a shared understanding of when, how, and/or why it may be appropriate for a superintendent to act by stepping in to provide the principal with protection or reinforcement.

Fred discussed his appreciation for organizational role boundaries commenting that he thinks "it's really important to understand your role in how everything works and so I'm a principal. I'm not a superintendent. I'm not a school board member … those positions are higher than mine in authority level."

While each of the participants spoke of role boundary and delineation, they also reinforced a recognition of interdependence in the principal-superintendent relationship.

Jan captures a notion common across the study participants: "Yes, the superintendent is the boss, but I also feel like it should be more of an open partnership. You're both directing different parts of the district, but for the same goal. There shouldn't necessarily be a ton of friction."

Appreciation for context

Participants expressed appreciation when they noticed how superintendents approached and validated the unique context of the principals' schools.

Perceptions of trustworthiness were strengthened when superintendents acknowledged the particulars of a school's context and recognized the importance of a principal's autonomy in leading the school given the school's needs, culture, and community.

Superintendents who sought to understand and demonstrated an understanding of a school's context were also perceived to be better positioned to provide principals with support.

From Fred's perspective, superintendents who he perceives as most trustworthy enact leadership with an expressed and authentic interest in learning about his school. He sees this as a key action for the superintendent to provide informed and meaningful district-level leadership. Extending the notion,

James discussed one superintendent's arrival and how he valued her approach:

> When she came in we were pretty disjointed. Not many decisions were made district wide. It was a lot of individual schools doing individual things. She was always interested in 'What are you doing? What do you see? How do you know who we were?' She didn't come in with any programs—she didn't come in with an agenda. She was building on each school, recognizing the difference and not saying, 'We're all going to be the same.' But saying, 'You're different. You're trying to reach the same goals different ways.'

Presence

For the participants in this study, perceptions of superintendent trustworthiness were influenced by *presence*—a willingness "to be there" and in how a superintendent's "being there" was interpreted as meaningful and supportive rather than obtrusive.

Carol characterized one superintendent's presence as frequent and obtrusive (rather than supportive): "When her car would pull in the driveway I would start to be like, 'Oh gosh, now what?'"

Contrasting her experiences and perceptions of presence across superintendents, she noted an impact in the way in which she monitored her interactions with this superintendent. This influenced her attention and energy in her own school leadership:

> If I'm not distracted and not having to worry…then it gives me more energy to put into what is going on here at school. If I see the car pull up and that sends an emotional reaction through me, it takes away from the next things I need to do in the building and drains my energy. I have to focus extra hard on protecting my building from my own reaction and from anything else that's going on.

To illustrate the ways in which presence was perceived and experienced by the participants, examples shared in this section describe superintendent: 1) availability, and 2) visibility.

Availability

Availability refers to the ability for a principal to reach a superintendent and perceptions of how attentive, invested, and/or responsive a superintendent is in the moment.

Availability is felt by principals as Carol noted, "to have the superintendent immediately there for me" and that as a principal they are not "dangled out there with no support." She concluded, "I think it boils down into that, being available and then being in the moment."

Perceptions of availability include spontaneous moments as problems, questions, or concerns emerge for principals. They also include how superintendents go about arranging ways to make themselves available regularly and predictably to principals.

For Carol, one superintendent's presence—immediate availability and support—in a "horrendous emergency situation" was key in perceiving that he was trustworthy.

Recognizing that superintendents are busy and not always available instantaneously, Carol elaborated on the way in which her perceptions of superintendent trustworthiness have been influenced by response time: "If you get a response quickly, like that equates to caring. 'I know this is on your mind right now and I care enough about you that I'm going to communicate with you about this right now'…and it builds trust."

Visibility

Perceptions of superintendent trustworthiness are strengthened when principals perceive a superintendent is in tune with the heartbeat of both a school and the larger organization. For this to occur, a superintendent needs to actively seek out face-to-face interactions as a demonstrative act of concern, interest, and commitment to those who comprise the school system.

> James contrasted his experiences with superintendent visibility not only in the frequency of visits to his school, but also in the purpose of the visit. "[One superintendent] was aware of and wanted to know what was going on, so she spent time in the school. She would come in." For James, this demonstrated a desire to

> understand the triumphs and struggles of day-to-day life in an elementary school.

Alternatively, perceptions of another superintendent's trustworthiness were compromised and consistently reinforced as he rarely visited school and when he did, the perceived purpose of the visit was not aligned with reasons that James would expect.

> When he walked through the door at my school I was always surprised. I just didn't expect to see him there. When he did come, it was never to see a classroom … It was delivering something or talking with someone or following up on something … but it wasn't about education.

Fred's account of superintendent visibility also links presence and purpose noting that it necessarily includes building relationships:

> I don't think that you build relationships superficially. I think that you have to show you're open. You have to come over and watch the kids in some kind of a performance or some kind of presentation that we have. Get involved with them. I know it has to be hard because there are so many schools in the district, but they need to be out there. They can't just be sitting in their office mandating things.

Openness

The final perceived Indicator of Superintendent Trustworthiness emerging from the data is *openness* and it describes the stance or approach from which superintendents enact their leadership. As characterized by the principals, openness refers to both receptive and expressive communication.

Illustrative examples in this section include: 1) the value and role of superintendents asking questions and listening, and 2) the importance of honesty, clarity, and transparency.

Asking questions and listening

Asking questions and listening were two of the most noted codes in this analysis. Principals repeatedly referred to the value they hold in superintendents who ask questions and listen.

Furthermore, perceptions of superintendent trustworthiness were bolstered when the purpose of questioning and listening is interpreted as a genuine interest in knowing about individual schools, educators, students, and families who comprise the district. Such openness indicated to principals that a superintendent sees the principal-superintendent team as interdependent and that superintendents relied upon knowing and learning from others to inform the course of their own leadership.

Connecting this to a core value of his own school leadership, Fred noted that superintendents should "Ask a lot of questions. Get to know the feel of the place. That exudes that lifelong learner type mentality. I would trust them going forward."

Enduring the turnover of six superintendents in his 15 years as principal, Fred offered advice to superintendents new to a school system: "Come in and do a lot of listening and asking questions before they try to put an imprint on the organization." He also highlighted how one superintendent's openness helped build perceptions of trustworthiness.

> He came in a little rough, but he's really wanted to expand his horizons. It took him about a year and half, but he said, 'You know, Fred, I don't have any elementary experience.' I looked at him and I said, "I know.' So, it was out there.

Fred perceived that this superintendent demonstrated trustworthiness by acknowledging vulnerability—a limited understanding of elementary schools—and by asking questions and listening opened himself to "meaningful conversation."

Honesty, clarity, and transparency

Three closely related ideas regarding superintendent communication were expressed by principals in the study help to illuminate the theme of openness and promote perceptions of superintendent trustworthiness: 1) honesty, 2) clarity, and 3) transparency.

Although participants did not talk at extended length about their interpretations of superintendent honesty, it was clear that for each participant honesty was an important characteristic of superintendent trustworthiness.

Fred noted of school leaders: "If we're not honest, we won't last very long in our jobs." He shared the details of one superintendent's early departure from the district with the School Board terminated his contract before its end.

> He wasn't truthful, and he was pretty ineffectual. Put those two together and it catches up with you pretty quickly. He would tell people that he was doing things that he was not doing. People know what's happening so if you start telling stories and don't keep 'em straight, which nobody can really do for a long time, you're going to get caught… and he got caught.

Carol addressed the challenge she felt in having honest and open discussions in her interactions with one superintendent. Carol's collected interpretations of interactions led to suspicion in what the superintendent shared with her and with other school constituents:

> I wonder how [the work Carol was doing at her school] got represented to the Board. I felt like there could be some problems with, I mean, manipulation is a really negative word … I did not trust what she was saying to me. I never felt like I could trust what I said to her to be relayed in any kind of a form that I meant it in.

For Carol, the growing perceptions of dishonesty were amplified by the other challenges she interpreted of her interactions with this superintendent. In turn, this compelled her to be cautious in the extent she was open with the superintendent. With lack of trust in the relationship, "There were too many indications that it was unsafe to share anything other than what I had to with her."

James commented directly about his perceptions of superintendent trustworthiness and the importance of clarity in superintendent communication and leadership:

> I'll go back to what I said, trust is saying what you mean and doing what you say. I think that's at the heart of it. When a superintendent is clear with their vision and clear with their structures, so you know where you're operating within the structure of the whole—you get to carve out and do what you do—understanding the expectations. But when they're not clear—when they say one thing to one crowd and another thing to another crowd and when you're talking to them individually it's another message, it's just too much. You have a real hard time trusting.

Role of ssuperintendent trustworthiness

In addition to findings which answered the research question, related findings emerged as

salient and their importance warrants discussion.

In this section, I turn to the voice of the principals as they shared how their perceptions of and experiences with superintendent trustworthiness play out in their own school leadership.

While each of the principals indicated that superintendent trustworthiness is important and a quality they desire in their leader,

Michaela was most emphatic as she concluded, "I have to have it in order to be able to work and be successful." She made a clear connection between her experiences of superintendent trustworthiness and her own employment decisions: "I quickly left those schools because of the element of trust… Those two places I bolted quickly, I had no sense of loyalty and trust."

On Michaela's account: "A sense of superintendent trustworthiness allows you to fully participate and not be afraid. You have to be able to do that in order to grow and push yourself. You have to be able to take risks… And I think that I've been a better leader because of it."

This parallels the findings of Tschannen-Moran (2001) and Hoy et al. (2006) that a culture of trust can provide a setting in which people are not afraid to openly admit errors, take risks, and share ideas.

Carol described this culture as a setting where: "People become more light-hearted, and they go about their day because an assumption is there that you've built that relationship and so there's much more energy for other things."

While not discounting its importance, Carol indicated that "trust can only go so far." Like each of the participants in the study, Carol expressed how a keen focus upon children and the people who comprise the school she leads remain her priority even in the absence of a trustworthy superintendent:

> The stakes are too high with the children …You're not going to let that outside stress get in the way of the care and the compassion and the determination you have to do a good job with those children and the people in your building. I have to have the strength to help this community be healthy even if under adverse times or relationships. So, if you have a superintendent who's not supporting you, who you don't have trust with—that's adverse. That's not great. But that to me was not anything I was going to let effect my own school leadership.

While Fred agrees that superintendent trustworthiness is important and desired, in his experience it is also rare. He noted:

> The trust factor, while very important, is not something that I've experienced a whole lot of. So, while we would all want a superintendent that we trust, that's not the end all and be all. Sometimes you don't have that person and you just have to make sure that you surround yourself with supportive staff, supportive parents, a supportive School Board and keep on going doing the right thing.

Consequentially, on Fred's account, "You have to roll with it. There's no other way around it. You have to keep going." Furthermore, "You either work with the

superintendents that you have or you work around them. I mean—that's the reality of the situation."

James poignantly noted, "I don't think I've worked with a superintendent who ever cared if I trusted them … I think they probably—and maybe this is going to sound maybe too cavalier—they didn't ever consider trust. Maybe they just assumed it." Contemplating the importance of trust in the principal-superintendent relationship, James shared his perspective which reflects Baier's (1986) observation that "There is such thing as unconscious trust" (p. 235).

James commented in our final interview:

> Certainly, as we've talked, I've reflected more about my relationship with superintendents and it's really interesting because there are times where I feel like the superintendent-principal relationship really isn't a focus. I don't really care what the superintendent's doing when I'm doing this work until it gets in the way. [laughs] Then it matters. Thinking about trustworthiness as a factor in that relationship, it's almost like the times when I am doing what I like or I feel like is beneficial to my practices, the relationship almost goes unnoticed. When superintendents do something that interferes with the work that I do that trust has the most impact.

In the end these findings present a somewhat conflicting picture of superintendent trustworthiness. While the principals consistently conveyed that trustworthiness has value and importance, each principal brought to the study their own perceptions and experiences—the good, the bad, and the ugly—which in turn influenced their own perception of just how much superintendent trustworthiness matters. Participants valued working with trustworthy superintendents. If such trust was not there, however, they were still going to do their jobs to the best of their ability.

The principals of this study have an abiding and unwavering commitment to their role as leaders for their teachers, students, and community. Superintendent trustworthiness is desired and perceived to enhance the principals' work and professional lives, but it is not something that they depend upon. In other words, a principal's perception of superintendent trustworthiness is *complementary to but not required for* a principal's own sense of efficacy, commitment, and resolve as a school leader.

Directions for Future Inquiry and Implications for Practice

There are many interesting questions about the role and impact of trust between and among school stakeholders that future studies could address. How does trust in a superintendent correlate with other valued outcomes and processes for a school and/or school system? What barriers exist in developing relationships characterized by trust between and among school stakeholders who are not under the same school roof? What are the stories of superintendents who are identified by others as successful leaders and what role does trust have in their leadership?

A deeper understanding of the way superintendents make sense of and characterize principal trustworthiness, including an exploration of how superintendents perceive the processes and outcomes of schools that trustworthy principals lead, would bring a

deeper understanding of trust in the principal-superintendent relationship. How do indicators of principal trustworthiness as characterized by superintendents compare with the indicators principals pointed to as evidence of superintendent trustworthiness?

In addition to the advice inferred from the participants' perceptions and experiences, the findings provide some practical insights for superintendents by identifying specific leadership behaviors and characteristics that build trust. An understanding of how the elementary principals in this study made sense of superintendent trustworthiness sheds light into how superintendents might frame their approach to learning about and working with principals. Superintendents should anticipate that building and sustaining perceptions of trustworthiness will take time and effort.

For superintendents who wish to be perceived by principals as trustworthy, there is value in quickly assessing the context in which they lead, learning about the contextual differences across schools within the district, and reflecting upon the level of trust/mistrust in their relationships as well as the contributing factors. The superintendents perceived as most trustworthy, on the account of the principals in this study, intentionally developed relationships with principals as individuals and differentiated their work and communications with principals in response to principal and individual school needs.

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