

## **Growing Teacher Professionalism through Professional Learning Communities and Trust**

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America's public schools face a daunting task. Regardless of socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, culture, disability, motivation, or familial support, compulsory education mandates public schools teach every child that walks through the door. Today's schools are open systems, vulnerable to external political and social influences. These multiple inputs create complex learning environments in which student achievement is positively or negatively impacted by forces unrelated to instruction (Bandura, 1993; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; and Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). Despite a teacher's lack of control over such influences, federal law such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) hold educators accountable to ever increasing standards for student achievement. Such complexity demands innovative solutions. Fullan (2001) argues that the level of complexity of our current world exceeds the adaptability of any one individual to successfully navigate. He purports individuals, working alone, lack the necessary catalog of answers to adjust effectively to continuously changing conditions. "Our only hope is that many individuals working in concert can become as complex as the society they live in" (Fullan, 2001, p.136). Yet, do educators have what it takes?

Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) argue that teaching as a profession is weak in fundamental constructs that undermine its ranking among other *true* professions (i.e. medicine and law). They also report some within the research community relegate teaching to the status of a *semi-profession*. Does this lack of professional status mean teachers lack the capacity to answer the difficult questions facing today's public schools? How can educators rise to the challenge of standards-based reform amidst such complex conditions? Tschannen-Moran (2004) suggests that schools embrace the creation of professional learning communities in order to

mobilize their collective capacity. She argues such communities create contexts where meaningful professional collaboration can increase teacher capacity and promote the collective efficacy necessary for increased student achievement. Tschannen-Moran also reports, fundamental to the creation of professional learning communities, is the development of trust relationships between administrators and teachers and among teachers themselves. She argues without trust between and among these central players, professional learning communities are in name only. This paper seeks to understand how professionalism relates to the building of professional learning communities and supports the central thesis that in order for teachers to function as professionals and for teacher professionalism to thrive, schools must cultivate greater competence in fostering trust. To examine this, a review of research was undertaken to understand what a profession is and why education may fall short of being ranked as one. Then professional learning communities are examined as a means for developing teacher professionalism and how trust is related to the creation of successful collaborative communities with the ability to increase student achievement.

### *Teaching as a Profession*

According to Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) education lacks both organizational and professional controls. "Neither professional socialization nor organizational policy provides clear definitions of teachers' roles and classroom practice; and neither schools nor collegial bodies have much capacity to meaningfully evaluate and sanction teachers" (Talbert and McLaughlin, 1994, p. 123). They argue that teachers' work lives are governed by local context rather than organizational or institutional mandates and sanctions.

According to Talbert and McLaughlin (1994), what distinguishes a profession from other occupations are *a specialized knowledge base, shared standards of practice, a strong service ethic, a strong professional identity and commitment to the career*, as well as *collegial* rather than *bureaucratic control over entry, performance evaluation, and retention*. Talbert and McLaughlin argue that education is weak on each criterion for professional status.

First, Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) suggest that teachers share a limited sense of technical culture. What is taught is not based on recognized standards shared within the profession. Instead of collective certainty over the intellectual bases of their pedagogy and not having practice that is deeply rooted in replicable, verified research, teachers receive training that differs from one pre-service institution to another. However, Labaree (1998), points out such variations may be due to the applied nature of the educational research that drives pre-service training. Educational research's context specific applicability reflects the need to find solutions to problems associated with a particular time and situation. Labaree suggests that educational research is an applied science rather than a field that can develop grounded *laws*. Labaree further argues this speaks to the dynamic nature of teaching and learning. What is effective in one context may not be as effective in another. This is because teaching and learning is not mechanical. It is a social enterprise that changes based on the social players, culture, and politics of a particular time and place. Never-the-less, Talbert and McLaughlin state some critics of teacher professionalism see promise in the growing body of research-based best practices that attempt to rise to the call of standards-based reform. Such a research focus is more reflective of an emerging technical culture and standard. They argue such changes are slow but speak to transformations on a macro level.

Based on Talbert and McLaughlin's (1994) analysis, a *strong service ethic* is the second construct with noted variability in teaching. They note, "...client orientation receives uneven application in schools, depending largely on teachers' assessments of student interests, abilities,

and motivation" (p. 127). In short, they argue teachers must be more inclusive in their collective commitment to all students. A teacher's job is not to teach a subject. It is to teach every student who walks through their door the knowledge and skills of that content area and more broadly to be contributing members of society. This requires that teachers collectively share the responsibility for the education of *all* students (e.g. students with disabilities, at-risk students, students of low SES, different cultures, etc.) and not just those reflective of the teacher's personal bias.

*Commitment to the profession and controls* are the last two constructs Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) critique. Citing a study by Lortie (1975), Talbert and McLaughlin state that many in the field of education view teaching as a temporary or in-between option, not a life-long career. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) support this claim reporting that almost 40% of all new teachers leave the field within the first 5-years.

Policy restricts teacher input regarding peer evaluation and retention. However, Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) suggest that traditional norms encouraging turfism amongst teachers inhibit the kind *controls* that characterize other professions regarding standards of practice. They report strong norms against *intrusions on professional space* constrain collaborative inquiry and the development of collective standards. Rather than engaging peers in collaborative investigation, teachers have historically gone it alone. To go against this norm is considered an intrusion into professional autonomy. However, this can leave teachers feeling isolated and alone when faced with students or situations that are difficult to handle.

To combat these inhibitors to teacher professionalism, Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) suggest that "...communities of teachers—based in collegial networks...constitute the meaningful unit and potential for teacher professionalism in U.S. education" (p.130). They suggest the impetus for moving education towards greater professionalism lies at the local level. They argue, "...teacher professionalism depends, to a significant degree, on the extent and character of local teacher community" (p. 141). For teacher professionalism

to exist, changes at the micro level are required because norms of practice are socially negotiated within the day to day contexts of teachers' lives. When correctly established, local community support networks foster a common knowledge base, create concern and shared responsibility for the learning of *all* students, and empower robust professional identities and commitments to the field (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994).

Conversely, without opportunities to acquire new knowledge, to reflect on practice, and to share successes and failures with colleagues, teachers are not likely to develop a sense of professional control and responsibility (p. 130).

Along with the establishment of teacher communities they also suggest that teachers act like professionals from other occupations. In communities that create shared norms and foster greater commitment to the profession, becoming consumers of research and best practices is essential. This is a standard among doctors and lawyers but is less so within the realm of education. Consuming up to date research informs and ignites the technical culture, which Talbert and McLaughlin found to be essential in promoting a broader and deeper service ethic. This finding suggests that strong client orientation is impacted by a teacher's knowledge, skill, and self-efficacy in meeting the needs of diverse learners and is not simply a matter of personal bias. To address student needs that fall outside the purview of individual experience and expertise requires one to reach out to peers with understanding of best practice in those areas. This further enumerates the need for collaborative, professional, support networks through which teachers can widen their spheres of influence and grow in professional orientation.

### *Professional Learning Communities*

"In order for schools to adapt to changing external demands and the diverse needs of students, there are increasingly urgent calls to transform schools into professional learning communities" (Tschannen-Moran, 2009, p. 17)

Tschannen-Moran (2004) states for professional learning communities to exist three important features must be present: a) adults within them act and are treated as professionals; b) there is a focus on learning; and c) there is a strong sense of community.

Professional learning communities help to answer the concerns over teacher professionalism in several ways. Norms of practice are hashed out in the day to day lives of teachers (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). Therefore, for professionalism to grow through the development of professional learning communities it must be lived at the micro level. Once created and nurtured, they provide an opportunity to expand one's knowledge base through professional, collegial dialogue. Learning communities open doors and stand in opposition to traditional norms of isolationism and the protecting of one's turf. It allows teachers to benefit from each other's experiences and encourages group investigation of best practice methodology grounded in research. As Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) point out, these collaborative support networks, in turn, can deepen a teacher's service ethic. By allowing and encouraging teachers to come together in support of one another for the purpose of increasing student achievement, professional learning communities tap into their collective capacity and build each other's technical cores. This increases both individual and collective self-efficacy. Rather than protecting against *professional intrusions*, learning communities promote the development of shared norms and encourage shared responsibility for the education of *all* students. As teachers experience greater success with their students, the collaborative process is reinforced. This affirmation can lead to increased job satisfaction and promote greater professional identity and commitment to the field. Yet, to create true professional learning communities leadership is required that supports their development and creates structures that nurture their growth in both explicit and implicit ways.

This point was clearly articulated by Tschannen-Moran (2009) in a study that examined how the professional orientation of principals impacts the development of teacher professionalism in schools.

Explicitly, principals need to create opportunities for collaboration and build collective efficacy. This can be done by creating common planning times, supporting the creation of common assessments and enabling teachers to have vicarious and mastery experiences that promote cohesion and deeper efficacy beliefs (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). In addition to this, Tschannen-Moran hypothesized that the degree of teacher professionalism in a school is related to the principal's professional orientation as they exercise administrative authority, "...especially in the extending of adaptive discretion to teachers in the conduct of their work, and the trust evident among various actors in the school community" (2009).

Tschannen-Moran (2009) points out that schools must employ a certain level of bureaucratic control to coordinate the complexity of educating large and diverse populations. This assumes levels of hierarchy, a division of labor, policies and regulations. Unfortunately, this alone can promote leadership that is bureaucratic in orientation. Such leadership relies heavily on rules and regulations and is transactional in nature. Inherent in this type of system is a sense of distrust (Tschannen-Moran, 2009) which is counter to the culture that professional learning communities need to grow. This is further exacerbated by the stress administrators experience in leading schools to ever increasing achievement results on state-wide accountability assessments.

However, Tschannen-Moran (2009) warns, "...school leaders would do well to resist adopting a more bureaucratic orientation with its implicit distrust". To foster greater teacher professionalism she states leaders need to extend adaptive discretion to teachers and adopt practices that deepen trust among school leaders, teachers, students and parents. She argues, "...for teachers to live up to these higher expectations of professionalism, attention needs to be paid to issues of the leadership orientation of principals and to the relationships of trust in schools" (2009).

In her study on leadership orientation and trust, Tschannen-Moran (2009) discovered that the *professional orientation of principals* and *faculty trust* make independent contributions to the

explanation of the variance regarding teacher professionalism. Functioning together, these two variables explain 57% of the variance. This is a significant finding. It implies that principals set the tone for teacher professionalism in their building by their own professional orientation and exercise of administrative authority. Those with bureaucratic bends tend to be less effective in fostering the trust relationships necessary for teacher professionalism. Trust is essential because the work of schools is essentially a social interplay. Bureaucracy is inherently distrustful in its strict adherence to policy and procedure. However, professional cultures are established and nurtured on a foundation of trust between the various actors within a school. How trust is established and nurtured is central to the building of teacher professionalism as it relates to the creation of professional learning communities.

### *Trust Matters*

Faculty trust in schools is the collective and shared beliefs of teachers. Trust relationships are developed through interdependence with the understanding that the interest of one cannot be achieved without reliance upon another (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). One of the most important interdependent relationships in schools is clearly seen how teachers depend on the principal and the principal depends on the teacher. Faculty trust is defined as, "*one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable and competent*" (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). However, greatness will not be achieved without a strong sense of shared creation and shared responsibility (Cosner, 2009). School leaders require skills in the building of trust in order to create a climate that facilitates positive interdependent relationships. It is impossible for leaders to lead without the trust of those they manage. Today's world is filled with complexity that is beyond any single individual to successfully navigate. Lombardi (2003) asserts that school leaders should build for their teams a "feeling of oneness and dependence upon one another because strength is derived from unity". Therefore, for any organization to succeed it requires the ability of leaders to tap into the collective creativity of their



organization. This requires collaboration and the organizational structures that foster its potential. Relationships that embrace collaboration and interdependency demonstrate a critical competency for an organization to succeed and sustain high performance (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

A central issue in human relationships and a mainstay at the center of collaboration is trust. The more trusted people feel, the greater the potential for innovation. Members of organizations, to include schools, are willing to listen and accept the influence of the people they trust because trust is perceived as a deep-seated element of a successful team (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). In order to affect student learning and achievement, communities of scholars are embracing social factors that impact schools and classrooms. Answers to these difficult issues can be varied and contextual. As a result, a one-size fits all approach is unrealistic and flawed. To tackle the difficult problems of education, schools and communities must come together through collaborative engagement and collectively generate solutions that meet the needs of students. To meet the needs of students and address the mounting societal expectations of schools seems almost impossible without trust (Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

School climates and cultures are derived through social relations and interactions of the organization's members. A climate of trust must be nurtured (Gabriel, 2005). Empirical research has identified collegial trust as having a vital role in building effective schools. Collegial trust impacts effective communication and exchange of information, support for conflict resolution and diminishes disagreements that attack individual views, while encouraging perceived psychological safety. Furthermore, collegial trust may positively influence collaborative work relationships regarding task performance, commitment to tasks and team satisfaction. There must be deliberate settings that provide interaction for staff to discuss lower-risk topics before moving into higher-risk topics. Effective interactions among staff must be opportunities to work in strategically composed teams (Cosner, 2009).

Five facets of trust are identified to have a direct impact on the progress of building successful schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). *Benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence* are considered to have a direct relationship on academic performance and the ability to have collaborative decision-making with administrators, teachers, students, parents and the public. Without the five aforementioned features, stakeholders may experience alienation and resentment and leaders will find it difficult to build a common vision and foster acceptance of group goals (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The increased stress that many teachers encounter can lead to dissatisfaction in schools (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). However, stress and dissatisfaction can be diminished by the level of trust facilitated by school leaders who provide opportunities to develop collegial trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

As one may examine the facets of trust, these facets vary together and shape a coherent impression of trust in schools (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). For instance, when trust in the *benevolence* of others is absent, there is likely to be a loss in overall productivity due to a need to invest energy in making mental provisions or plans that are not in line with the mission of the school (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). *Honest* actions and communication need to be pervasive. Internal and external stakeholders require school leaders and teachers to exhibit behavior that is forthright and deliver communication that is consistently aimed at maintaining the school's mission while keeping all stakeholders connected (Marx, 2006). *Openness* through organized and deliberate communication is necessary in schools that seek to meet the needs of students. Schools that disseminate accurate information, disclose facts and enjoy the open exchange of ideas help develop trustworthy relationships among stakeholders (Marx, 2006; and Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Higher educational standards and greater school accountability have fostered environments of distrust and blame. Distrust constrains communication, offers poor organizational citizenship and the creation of dysfunctional rules (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The barrage of inappropriate behavior reported and sensationalized in the media has caused increased

suspicion and distrust of school personnel. The media often aggravates distrust by quickly reporting negative occurrences versus trustworthy events. Furthermore, it is essential that administrators and teachers are *reliable* and *competent*. School leaders and teachers must look at ways to overcome the collapse of trust and demonstrate consistency between the beliefs they espouse and the goals of the school. School leaders must protect the central work of schools and ensure that staff possess and maintain the level of skill necessary to do the job (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Education has a vital role that serves to develop the knowledge, skills and behavior of students. It is important to understand that the teaching and learning process is a unique kind of relationship that must exist between the teacher and learner (Sullo, 2007). In order to identify the bridges that exist between the teacher and learner, it is important to examine the effects of trust. Trust matters because it makes a difference in the culture and climate of the school, thus effecting student achievement (Gabriel, 2005). If distrust exists then the significant relationship between trust and student achievement can be negatively affected (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). In a climate of distrust, teachers are unlikely to give their best efforts to the school and its mission and student achievement is further diminished (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

External and internal stakeholders have a set of personal beliefs which serve as a foundation for assumptions, actions and decisions. There is an increase in the diversity in schools and teachers may not be aware of the impact trust can have on student learning. The evidence is ever increasing that trusting relationships among teachers, parents, and students promote student achievement and improvement (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). What a student feels about the subject matter and learning directly affects their cognitive development (Garner, 2007). In order for a school to be effective, everyone on the team needs to be connected and possess a shared meaning of the overall purpose schools exist. Working together is the only way to improve the education system and the achievement for children (Marx, 2006).

### *Conclusion*

Critics against viewing teaching as a *true* profession base their arguments on the fact that teaching lacks many of the organizational and professional controls that are prevalent within other recognized fields. Talbert and McLaughlin argue that teaching is weak in each of the areas that characterize a profession. However, this does not mean that teachers cannot be professionals. Rather than finding legitimacy on a macro level, teachers must become professionals through the building of professional learning communities at the local level. Such structures create shared norms of practice, develop deeper client orientation as teacher self-efficacy increases, and promote greater commitment to the profession. Such communities answer many of the criticisms against recognizing teaching as a *true profession*.

However, the responsibility for the creation of these communities does not solely rest on the shoulders of teachers. Rather, Tschannen-Moran (2009) points out it is the professional orientation of school leadership that sets the tone for teacher professionalism within a school. Principals must create structures that promote and engender collaboration and the development of trust relationships within their schools. They must establish, champion, and hold all accountable to the cultivated shared norms of trust. Principals create the context for teacher professionalism to flourish. Those with a more bureaucratic orientation will not see the results a more professional orientation can create.

It is a huge responsibility. However, research indicates without the development of true, supportive learning communities, individuals will be left to solve problems that are beyond any single individual to grasp or navigate. Today's problems are complex and come at schools from multiple inputs. To tackle these difficult issues requires answers equal to the complexity of the problems being faced. Therefore, collective problem solving and synergistic solutions must become the norm and not the exception.

When it comes to student achievement, professional learning communities represent a mechanism for promoting inclusive decision

making and shared responsibility for achievement outcomes. However, none of this can be accomplished without trust. Trust is the unifying construct linking teacher professionalism to professional learning communities, to the professional orientation of school leaders as they use administrative authority.

### *Implications for Future Research*

Teachers are investors and their portfolios are filled with futures. As the teaching profession truly becomes more and more professional, there will be no greater return than positively impacting the future through investing in a child's success. As one considers future research in this area, it would be noteworthy to identify reasons that lead to the burnout of new teachers and ways to combat their exodus from education. Nearly half of new teachers leave the profession within their first 5-years (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). This is a serious indictment against the socialization of new teachers. Lack of professional standards in this area is one of the arguments against considering teaching a true profession. It is especially significant given that NCLB demands that classrooms be filled with highly qualified teachers. It would be useful to understand the needs of new teachers and how this relates to the building of trust relationships. This could help identify areas related to new standards for teacher socialization and possibly aide in retaining these newest inductees to the profession.

Another area of future research could be to conduct an ethnographic examination of what it means to be a professional teacher from multiple perspectives (e.g. principal, general education teacher, special education teacher, superintendent). To what degree do these perspectives differ and in what way? Is there a disconnect or is there coherence?

That which promotes teacher professionalism will promote greater student engagement and achievement. This is the focus that must be maintained. Teacher professionalism, professional learning communities, etc. are not ends by themselves. Rather, they are the means through which educators hone their craft for the purpose of

improving educational outcomes for *all* students. Standards-based reform has thrown down the gauntlet. To rise to the challenge requires solutions that reflect the real problems students and educators face. Therefore, answers to issues are likely to be best when they are informed by research and adapted to meet the need of localities. One size cannot fit all. However, through collaboration, support and trust, educators can demonstrate they have what it takes to meet these challenges with professionalism and positive results.

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