

Learning and growing: trust, leadership, and response to crisis

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of trust in a school community related to the leadership response to crisis.

Design/methodology/approach – This study was a multiple-source qualitative study of a single case of a PreK-12 international school called The Learning School.

Findings – The findings revealed the nature of how leadership influences and is influenced by context and community. These led to a discussion about two shifts, the focus on self to focus on others and the collective community, and a shift from a focus on self-preservation and protection to learning and growing together as a community. Communication, decision making, and collaboration in the community played a significant role in the community learning and growing from the crisis.

Research limitations/implications – The study was limited by the nature of the topic, crisis in schools. The nature of crisis limits the ability to engage in inquiry before the crisis, and the inquiry was limited to the specific case that occurred in a unique context. The author proposes future cross-case research to develop an understanding of school and leader responses to crisis varies across individuals and contexts, and culture.

Originality/value – While there is a growing literature about trust, it is difficult to study schools in crisis due to the limitations of the topic and sensitivity of issues of crisis in schools. This study gives insight into the dynamics of leadership and trust in a school in crisis.

Keywords Leadership, Trust, Crisis, School community

Paper type Research paper

School communities face a complex landscape of challenges where uncertainty has become the norm. Difficult policy climates, failed school improvement, the scarcity of financial resources, violence, tragedy, poverty, and maintaining a quality teacher workforce are among the social and professional issues school leaders are expected to navigate while building meaningful communities of learning (Truscott and Truscott, 2005). School leaders may not be able to control or influence the occurrence of crises, but their responses can lead to positive learning and change in schools and communities (Mishra, 1996).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of trust in a school community related to the leadership response to crisis. While interviewing school leaders and community members, it was evident that the ebb and flow of trust within the school community was a significant dynamic that shaped and was shaped by the way the school leadership and school community responded to crisis. This study builds on prior trust research (Tschannen-Moran, 2004) but is a unique contribution to help us understand the way school communities can learn and grow through challenging conditions.

The paper begins with a review of literature related to trust followed by an overview of the context of the study. The attention then turns to a discussion of data collection and analysis techniques. Following a reporting of the key findings the discussion explores two shifts that were apparent in the perceptions of the community. The paper then concludes with implications, and suggestions for how these findings help us understand how response to crisis relates to the nature of trust in a school community.

The importance of trust

Trust is vital for individuals working together to create effective systems (Seabright *et al.*, 1992). Trust works as a lubricant for social and interpersonal interactions (Arrow, 1974;



Goodwin, 1996) leading to desired behaviors including altruism, civic virtue, and conscientiousness (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Trust also reduces the number of transactions among employees necessary to complete tasks (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). Distrust results in anxiety and insecurity, causing individuals to monitor others' motives (Fuller, 1996) and to protect oneself to avoid being taken advantage of (Limerick and Cunnington, 1993). Distrust undermines cooperation and efficiency (Deutch, 1958; Tarter *et al.*, 1989; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000), and communication (Grovier, 1992; Tschannen-Moran, 2014b). Individuals use their time to defend their own interests (Tyler and Kramer, 1996).

While trust is defined and conceptualized in different ways, comprehensive definition of trust that has been empirically tested extensively in schools is "Trust is one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is (a) benevolent, (b) reliable, (c) competent, (d) honest, and (e) open" (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000, p. 556). Benevolence is the belief that the other has my best interest in mind. Reliability is the belief that the other will come through for me. Competence is the belief that the other is capable of accomplishing a given task. Honesty is the belief that the other will be forthright with information and do what is right. Openness is the belief that the other will share accurate and needed information.

In schools, trust is recognized as a critical component related to both student achievement and the behaviors of individuals and groups that contribute to effective schools (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2014b). Without trust, people do not take risks that characterizes genuine learning (Tschannen-Moran, 2014a). Even more so, in times of crisis or change, trust is a resource that can lead to schools to continue to learn and to flourish. It is important to consider what trust means to the relationships between groups in a school community. The important relationships are primarily between teachers and leaders, teachers and clients (students and parents), parents and schools, students and teachers, and between colleagues (Tschannen-Moran, 2014b).

Most of what we know about trust in schools is framed within the general school experience and the regular life experiences of school community stakeholders. Studies have looked at schools facing great challenges, e.g. issues of poverty (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Goddard *et al.*, 2001) and in diverse contexts. Work by Van Maele and Van Houtte (2009, 2011) has found that faculty trust is related to organizational value culture, size, and composition of schools, and that a high percentage of immigrant students lowers faculty trust in parents. Teachers perceptions of students' ability to meet the demands of imposed expectations on them impacts the formation of trust (Van Maele and Van Houtte, 2011). This review of the literature found limited research that examined trust within a school community that was experiencing a crisis. Of note was a study by Brooks (2015) that examined trust in a community in Thailand where insurgent attacks have occurred, and where the threat of insurgent attacks looms over the community and school. Therefore, there is little that we know about the dynamics of trust when there is crisis in schools.

Crisis, change, and trust

Research on crises in schools predominantly focuses on prevention, or on the mechanics of the responses during and immediately after a crisis (Jimerson *et al.*, 2005; Klingman, 1987) including important actions involving communication (Allen and Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1997). Existing knowledge and practice focuses primarily on prescribed protocols and actions that are akin to algorithms for technical responses to stressors and changes brought about by crisis. Little to no research, however, investigates how the conditions of schools and communities relate to crisis for extended periods beyond the crisis event.

Crises can take on many forms, but four common characteristics include a threat to the survival of a system, time pressure, an ill-structured situation (Turner, 1976), and inadequate resources for a response (Mishra, 1996). Responses to crises involve decisions about resource allocation that can result in negative organizational outcomes or positive

learning and change (Marcus and Goodman, 1991). Positive outcomes require a foundation of trust for the organization and leadership on the individual, stakeholder, and community levels. Whatever the outcomes may be, change occurs as a result of a crisis, and school leaders stand at the helm during change.

The possible outcomes of a crisis, whether positive or negative, are dependent on the organizational behaviors during the crisis. Behaviors that occur during crises affect not only the technical dynamics of organizational response, but the cultural dynamics within communities that are dependent on trust. Several of the factors that affect the technical and cultural dynamics include the nature of communication, the centrality or distribution of power and decision making, and the conservation and use of resources (Staw *et al.*, 1981). Although it is difficult to envision positive outcomes in a crisis, difficult times present an organization or community with the opportunity to learn and grow.

Conceptual framework

The framework for this study is one of trust and responses to crisis. Mishra (1996) identified three components that represent positive responses to crisis that are related to trust. The first is decentralized decision making, which involves the redistribution of decision-making authority to individuals other than the upper level leadership (Mishra, 1996). Devolving the decision-making process during crisis, and including stakeholders, is related to higher levels of trust. The second is undistorted communication both downward from upper level leadership and upward from stakeholder groups and individuals (Mishra, 1996). Beliefs in the honesty, openness, and benevolence (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000) of leadership elicits the same facets of trust from followers, thus enhancing the accuracy and benefit of reciprocal communication processes between leaders and followers (Sutherland and Yoshida, 2015). The third is collaboration within and between organizations, which the interactions and actions between individuals and stakeholder groups to satisfy the needs of all parties (Mishra, 1996). In this scenario, not each party gets their way, but needs are met through collaboration and compromise.

Rather than conceptualize the responses from a positive perspective, I take a neutral stance and label them the nature of decision making, the nature of communication, and the nature of collaboration. Although these responses have been studied in relation to trust (Mishra, 1996), I aimed to utilize the five-faceted model of trust for this study (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000) to further elaborate on the trust concept, and the relationship between trust and responses during crises in schools. The Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) model has found great traction for studies in schools, and the five facets elaborate further on the nature of trust than previous research related to crisis (Mishra, 1996).

The Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) model of trust is considered an omnibus construct due to the fact that the facets of trust co-vary so closely. However, in this qualitative inquiry seeks to understand if any of the facets emerge as more important than others related to the trust perceptions of community members and the way leaders responded to crisis. I frame the facets of trust – benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence – in relation to the response types – the nature of decision making, communication, and collaboration. I aimed to explore the nature of trust in the community as it related to leadership responses to crisis during a period of one year after the tragedy. Thus, the following questions guided this study:

- (1) What was the climate of trust in The Learning School (TLS) community during the crisis, immediately following the tragedy through one year following the events?
- (2) To what extent do the three areas of the organizational response framework, specifically the nature of decision making, the nature of communication, and the nature of collaboration explain the TLS leaders' response to crisis? How did these responses relate to trust?
- (3) In what ways has the school community changed from the experience?

Method

Design of the study

This study was a multiple-source qualitative study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003) of a single case of a PreK-12 international school called TLS. It was designed to gather rich descriptions of school leaders, teachers, students, and parents experiences and perceptions of the nature of trust and leadership responses during the crisis period. Although qualitative methods are not typically utilized for studying trust, they have been employed when they are the best way to obtain the rich data needed to understand the complexities of trust in crisis (Brooks, 2015). Member checks were used throughout the study with individual members and groups, as well as with the community at a stakeholder meeting.

The researcher, “I,” was invited to facilitate a self-study by the TLS community in order to assist in the community processing the many changes and formal and informal reorganization dynamics that occurred following the tragic events. I was restricted by my etic positionality, as an outsider to the community, the culture, and the historical memory of the school including the experience during the crisis. In times of crisis it is important to ensure the confidentiality of all participants, and even of the school community as a whole, and I was cognizant of this priority as I made decisions to remove potentially compromising descriptive information about the context, and findings.

Context of the study

TLS was a non-profit, non-proprietary, self-sustaining corporation of parents. It is governed by a ten member board of trustees. TLS was accredited by USA.

European, and host country national accreditation agencies and has an International Baccalaureate curriculum from K-12. TLS was located in an island nation where it serves approximately 600 students from a broad range of national and international clients from diplomatic, business, and local communities. The school serves Pre-K through grade 12 students in three school divisions, elementary, middle, and high school, that operate within the same compound and facility infrastructure. The school employs approximately 40 full time teaching faculty, who are led by an elementary principal, and a middle-high school principal. The overall operations, finance, policy, and human resource management of the school is the responsibility of the superintendent, who reports directly to a board of trustees. The parent community not only elects the board of trustees, but plays an active role through a supportive and influential parent teacher organization.

The make-up of the school is approximately 30 percent local national students, pseudonymously named Country A, many of whom have dual citizenship. 50 percent of the students and families are expatriates from a non-western country, pseudonymously named Country B. The remaining students and families are expatriates from a range of Western and European countries. Approximately 50 percent of the faculty and leadership were Western expatriates, and the remaining were local nationals. In general, the groups within the school community are represented on the PTA and board. Country B stakeholders are in general a very insular group. Thus, the school has appointed a community liaison for the Country B stakeholder group, as an effort to elicit involvement and increase representation in the school and community. The Western expatriates have considerable influence, but given the large representation of Country A nationals in the parent community, and the faculty and leadership.

Each year TLS students and faculty engaged in a service-learning experience where students plan and implement a form of intervention and support for a need in a host country community for a full week. Events can include working with schools in communities of poverty to provide materials and instructional support for host country national students to receive assistance in reading instruction. Other projects involve livelihood support such as providing boats and training for fishing communities, or supplies and training for farming

communities. The experiences are a major focus of school resources and an integral part of the ethos of the school.

During one of the service-learning trips two sixth grade students died in a tragic and complex series of events. Due to the sensitive nature of the tragedy, it is not within the scope of this study to explain the details of the events, nor to offer any evaluation of the events or decisions made by school leaders, employees, or parents leading up to the events. Rather, we begin our attention to this case during the crisis period. We frame the context and process as a crisis because the tragedy of student loss of life precipitated a near collapse of the school organization and community. The weight of such a tragedy exceeded the organizational and leadership capacities to manage operations within their existing resources, both tangible and intangible. The crisis period for this study is defined as the hours, days, months, and up to one year following the tragedy in order to explore the nature of trust in the community experience of crisis, and responses to the crisis.

Participants

Participants in this study were members of school community stakeholder groups including board members, school administrators, teachers, staff, and parents. Voluntary participation in a survey given as a part of a separate school self-study process was utilized to develop a participant pool. From that volunteer participant pool, purposeful sampling was employed in order to have representation of each stakeholder group and to target individuals who have been at the school for at least the last two years. Then, focus groups of five to eight participants for each stakeholder group, parents, teachers, and leaders, were formed from the volunteer participant pool. Individuals from the focus groups and from the volunteer participant pool were identified for follow up interviews.

Data collection and analysis

The data collection occurred in several phases and from different sources. The first data collection involved document analysis of minutes and field notes from stakeholder meetings taken in the months following the incident. The second source involved 13 stakeholder focus group discussions using semi-structured questioning and the use of a 45 minute group process protocol that asked prompting questions and allowed each member of the group to share. The final data collection involved interviews with individuals purposefully sampled from school board, administrator, teacher, and parent focus groups. The individual interviews included 13 teachers, the two principals, three central office administrators and 12 parents. The individual interviews lasted approximately one to one and a half hours each. Focus group processes and individual interviews were transcribed and coded and field notes were taken during each type of data collection.

The analysis first used the *a priori* trust codes representing the facets of trust, benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. The first attempt at analysis revealed two distinct stages in the data. Stage one was a time period immediately following the crisis and the immediate responses by the school, parents, and community. The dominant theme of stage one was distrust between parents, leadership, and teachers, and has been labeled Losing Trust. Stage two started at the departure of the superintendent and the establishment of an interim leadership team up until the time of the data collection for this study, one year following the tragic event. The dominant theme of stage two was an increase in trust, and it has been labeled the Increased Trust stage. After separating the data into these two stages, and in order to understand the way responses to the crisis changed and how that related to trust within the community, the data were further categorized according to response types, decision making, communication, and collaboration, and coded and categorized. Then the codes were interpreted in relation to the facets of trust and recoded and categorized. This process was completed for both the Losing Trust

stage and the Increased Trust stage. Furthermore, the categories developed for both response types and trust were structured in a matrix to allow us to compare the stages and explore the intersections of the categories, shown in Table I. The analyses revealed two shifts that were primary discussion points in the discussion section.

Findings

Losing trust

In the early times immediately following the tragedy, trust seemed to be at an all-time low. Parents and teachers primarily attribute this to problems in their perceptions of the school leadership, primarily the superintendent, with honesty, openness, and benevolence. While there was effort to care for stakeholders the perception was that the school was protecting itself. Although it was recognized that some information could not be shared the perception was that there was little openness. A teacher stated, "Trust is both ways, trust cannot be one way. At this stage I thought there was a lack of trust." A parent framed it in this way, "We thought that the teachers knew something but they weren't telling us. So we thought, can I trust them because they aren't telling me enough?" This led to the belief that the school was not benevolent, not acting in the best interest of students and parents, but rather protecting teachers and the superintendent. Teachers and parents cited examples of the superintendent manipulating students and information about the events. A board member noted that the superintendent did not meet with the parents of one of the students lost in the tragedy when they arrived at the school. She said, "How could this be? How could the leader not have the heart and compassion to meet with the parents, instead to hide from the truth and hide the truth?" These actions and behaviors undermined perceptions of openness, honesty, and benevolence, and damaged the trust between parents and the school.

The frailty of trust was revealed during this time in subgroups within the community, primarily the Western expatriate foreigners, the local nationals from Country A, and the Country B, a particularly large group of one non-western expatriate nationality group represented in the school. Western expatriate teachers and parents questioned their security in a foreign country. One teacher stated, "Will we be deported? Will the school support us with legal help if we need it?" National teachers and parents questioned the equality of treatment of faculty and parents relative to expatriates. The Country B community, which already felt isolated, said, "What can we say? We are at the mercy of the school if they will let us stay or kick us out. We do not have any power." She was questioning their representation and agency in the process, and whether or not the school cared as much for

	S1 response categories	S2 response categories	S1 trust categories	S2 trust categories
S1 response categories	–	Self vs collective identity	Uncertainty and self-preservation	–
S2 response categories	Self vs collective identity	–	–	Uncertainty and collective learning
S1 trust categories	Uncertainty and self-preservation	–	–	Protect vs learning
S2 trust categories	–	Uncertainty and collective learning	Protect vs learning	–
Emergent theme 1	Transition from focus on self to focus on collective			
Emergent theme 2	Transition from preservation and protection to learning			

Notes: S1, stage 1; S2, stage 2

Table I.
Intersection of stages
and categories and
emergent themes

their subgroup as for others. One of the primary reasons trust broke down was that the community had knowledge that the relationship between the superintendent and board of trustees had deteriorated. As a central office administrator recalled, "The chairman of the board was also not contacted much during this time." A positive initiative that maintained a level of trust within community groups in general was the formulation of an internal investigation committee comprised of members of stakeholder groups within the community.

The experiences and leadership responses in the Lower Trust stage were reflective of the conditions of trust and leadership that were a part of the culture for some time before the crisis. The development of the school was described by a school board member as "putting the house in order," referring to the work that went into policies, procedures, structures, and the technical aspects of school operations. TLS had come a long way in developing its infrastructure. The community wanted the developmental change, the board had directed the superintendent and leadership to address the development, and the community was satisfied with the progress of school improvement. An administrator stated:

The superintendent is a very goal oriented person. She would want to try to reach her goal as much as possible. But sometimes when you are too focused on the goal there are other human aspects that you forget about.

This status quo was a comfortable situation for the community, required little to no collaboration or participation of parents, middle leaders, or teachers. The superintendent managed school operations fairly independently and with the support of the board and community. A board member stated:

She was who she was, and she was the kind of leadership that the school needed before. You progress as you go, you need a certain kind of fit. Maybe at the time the board didn't see the kind of fit that they needed to see, but that was her. The trust environment was all shaken, because the authority was strong, she didn't talk to anyone, and whenever she is under pressure she does it herself.

There was very little collaboration and shared authority. A parent remarked, "This system worked for normal times," and was a result of both the leadership style of the superintendent and the leadership that was produced and reproduced by the community. The community trusted the superintendent's competence when in "normal times." When crisis happened, and competence was elusive for any leader, other facets of trust, specifically benevolence, honesty, and openness were not there.

The nature of decision making. When the crisis occurred an untenable stress was placed upon the system, and this revealed the limitations in the superintendent's leadership style, the leadership culture of the school, and the school's ability to respond to the crisis. In short, in holding the majority of influence, decision making, and authority, the weight of the crisis landed on the superintendent and the leadership at the school broke down. One teacher reported, "It is like the incident exposed the flawed nature of the structure most profoundly." A central office non-teaching staff administrator recalled, "The superintendent was making decisions from the office without consulting the principals." A board member stated:

To show any sign of or sort of softness was a weakness, and that is basically how I knew her. Unfortunately when this happened, I don't think it brought out the best in her. I think she was in a slow panic, and made certain decisions that were counterproductive to resolving early any potential issues with the parents. And because she was incapable of coming out of that mold it created much animosity with the parents.

At the very time the superintendent could have demonstrated openness and honesty by pulling together the community and involving the community in decision making, the community sense of benevolence was displaced by the control and authority position of the superintendent.

Parents who criticized the immediate response also offered that they did not know how it could have been handled in a manner that satisfied everyone. A member of the leadership team recalled the difficulty of decision making and communication:

The process of decision-making was very difficult because we want to be very transparent and we wanted to give information to people as quickly as possible. So the first stop is the lawyer telling you information can be held against you or used against the teacher. So that was one of the biggest decisions we made, to release the information to the parents.

Decision making was highly centralized, but the community reported that the superintendent was unable to handle the burden of the crisis. Parents and teachers communicated that decision making in the school leadership response seemed to be protective of the school and its leadership, and not representative of students and parents, undermining their belief in the honesty and benevolence of the leadership. For example, parents reported that the superintendent met with students alone, and that students were encouraged to report their experiences at the school favorably when they would be interviewed. Another example was that the staff involved in the incident were asked to resume their duties at the school without any leave. A staff member and parent recalled:

The administrative sanction of the teacher is not clear to me. I cannot see the real sanction for these people who are supposed to be responsible. As a staff member and parent I am looking for something else.

Parents were confused as to why those involved would not be placed on administrative paid leave for both their own protection and that of the community. There was little openness, and this eroded the belief in honesty of the leadership, and therefore the benevolence of the school toward all stakeholders.

The nature of communication. The immediate communications to the community were suppressed until the leadership felt they had the most accurate information. In the meantime, students and teachers and parents engaged in informal communication such that the community was influenced by multiple informal communication channels, which did not necessarily represent the most accurate information. Additionally, as soon as the local national media became aware of the tragic event, information was channeled to public channels. The school website was initially identified as a primary channel of communication for the school community. However, content was publicly accessed by the media, and further misinformation was spread in the media.

The perceptions of both teachers and parents was that there was, in the words of one parent, “a deliberate withholding and controlling of information.” This belief dealt a major blow to stakeholders’ beliefs about the honesty, openness, and benevolence of the school leadership. One teacher suggested that communicating about the incident would be disloyal to the school, “Even though I have this information I may cross some line. The culture says I should not cross the line to the other side.” A school leader suggested, “The system was set up before such that when a crisis came it exposed the structure of communication, and the communication structures created more problems.” Communication between parents, leaders, teachers, and national subgroups within the community closed down. Subgroups would communicate within their own smaller circles, but not with others. Parents, teachers, and some of the middle management had their own clear ideas about how to move forward as a community. They were not willing to share those ideas with others.

The nature of collaboration. The result of the centralized decision making, isolation, and lack of communication was that parents, teachers, and leaders were not collaborating. One parent recalled her response to a principal, “Your information is different than mine, so how can we collaborate?” A principal characterized the experiences as, “all of us in our smaller groups of leaders, teachers, parents, and even within different national groups were

circling the wagons.” Rather than reaching out and working together to address problems and move forward, suspicion and protectionism led to isolation within the community. One of the primary examples was that the relationship between the superintendent and the board of trustees broke down. The superintendent stopped working with the board, and as one board member suggested, “As a community we became a ship without a rudder.” A parent described it in this way, “There seemed to be a lot of people that wanted to take information from the school but very few who wanted to participate in how do we move forward.”

Restoring trust stage

Stage two, characterized by restoring trust, was marked by a change in the leadership structure of the school. The superintendent departed five months following the tragedy, and the board appointed an interim officer in charge (OIC) and leadership team. The OIC was a long time member of the community who had strong relationships with most of the stakeholder groups within the community. The principals and middle managers were tasked to re-envision the community response to the crisis and for moving forward into the future. Along with the board of trustees, this new leadership team also spearheaded the search for a new superintendent, who arrived the following school year.

Parent and teacher perceptions of honesty and openness and benevolence transitioned in a positive direction with the change in the leadership style and structure. Several factors contributed to this shift. First, the board of trustees exercised leadership that demonstrated a commitment to change and to the success of the school. The community held the board in high regard due to their decisions. Restructuring of leadership allowed for participative and collaborative leadership, which gave the community a great deal of confidence that their best interest was in mind. Openness and honesty were evident in the process of decision making and communication. In addition, the principals played a vital role as lynchpins between the leadership team and the community. The community believed the principals to be competent and reliable and honest and open. The principals focused on unifying the community, and their increased presence and authority seemed to result in a shift in the nature of trust in the community considerably. The principals became the voice and action of leadership and benevolence to the community. One parent expressed her appreciation for the principles:

The elementary principal really did a great job. He really reached out to all the parents. Sometimes he didn't even say a word. He was just being a good listener and showed empathy and sympathy. This was plain magic. If he wasn't there I am not sure what would have happened. Some parents were screaming their lungs out. He didn't have to say anything. He didn't come up with a magical formula. He was just there, and listening, and showing empathy. This was just wonderful.

Additionally, there appeared to be a shift in the community focus from self-preservation to an other-focused and learning perspective. While still early in the process, community groups are moving toward how they could be better prepared in advance of future challenges, and to build capacity to respond more effectively to a crisis. The focus on learning together was strongly related to the trust that parents, teachers, and leaders felt toward each other. Although there have been positive steps, there is still a great deal of uncertainty. The local national teacher Country A community, and the expatriate Country B parent community continue to perceive an inequality in their agency in the school relative to other groups in the community.

The nature of decision making. There was a clear shift in the leadership style from a centralized authoritarian managerial style to a participative style that called upon team members to fill needs with their unique expertise. In addition, the leadership was forced to reflect on the mission, vision, and future of the school and its community.

A parent stated it in this way, “The community is no longer wanting to be reactive to whatever may happen, but to be active in it. The idea of self-determination is important, and we need to chart our course forward.” This process did not result in simply a desire to improve policies and practice, but to call on the community to be clear on their identity and their values.

Additionally, the leadership team took on an approach to decision making that focused on re-learning the collective identity of the school. They started by engaging in town-hall style stakeholder meetings where through emotional discussions they wrestled with issues of preparedness and protocol, and pondered what was important for students to learn and grow at their school. Many community members reported ongoing uncertainty about what the school should do about the service-learning program, and what the future of the school would look like. Whether by intention, or by necessity, the participatory decision-making focused the community on how to learn to work together. One parent recalled a shift in perspective and responsibility that resulted in their desire to learn and contributing to the community learning:

All of us went through the mourning period, therefore we all became emotional in our own way and to different degrees. This fact became a huge problem. There were parents that misused their power and authority. Parents over-reacted. When we become emotional, we stop being rational. Instead of pacifying they added flame to the fire. In retrospect, I should have considered what would have been the better way to communicate to the school. When you become emotional you lose your balance. I thought things based on what I heard. I completely ignored that I should be making an effort to find out what happened and what the school was doing. It was a really difficult time for all of us. I think through this crisis we learned a great deal.

Parents and teachers and leaders communicated that it was not an easy time, but the process was prioritized, and later reflections by community members reveal an awareness of the growth that occurred. Furthermore, the intentional openness and honesty of these actions began to restore parents’ and teachers’ faith in the benevolence of the school leadership.

To compliment this shift the new superintendent entered the community with a focus on caring for students and focusing the community on their educational mission. One of the administrators stated:

He allows people to grow, and allows people to flourish. But you also have to take responsibility. You feel you own it. It feels empowering. As opposed to a leader that just gives strong direction, and everyone is following and fulfilling the direction. There is a leader that trusts them to do their job. People can see the difference already.

The new superintendent represented a very different approach, one that called others into responsibility and learning, which required trust.

The nature of communication. Communication improved considerably with the new leadership structure that focused on the community knowing what is best for all. Formally, the leadership team re-established official channels of communication both for school levels and community-wide. Additionally, regular stakeholder meetings were established to share leadership decisions, to share why decisions were made, and to invite participation in decision making. The active pursuit of opening communication lines has become a priority. As one parent noted, “This is the important procedure. To be there with parents, and to establish dialogue.” While the leadership is active in reaching out through communication, there are ongoing communication issues in the parent community. More specifically, parent groups continue to operate in an insular manner, communicating within their groups and not with the school. This has perpetuated rumors and inaccurate information about both operations and the future of the school. A parent from the expatriate Country B parent group expressed the ongoing concern of the group, “We are not sure if the school will close.

We have not been told anything, and we are afraid to ask because when something like this happened the school will eventually close.”

The nature of collaboration. Collaboration within the leadership team and faculty improved considerably with the leadership calling the community to learn how to work together. However, there is still limited collaboration with the local national teachers and the leadership, and the parents and the leadership. One example is that the expatriate Country B parents continue to be very isolated. Even though a cultural liaison position was established, there is a great cultural and language barrier between the Country B community and the school that has yet to be bridged.

Discussion and conclusion

Learning and growing

The analysis of the two stages following the crisis revealed a clear shift in the nature of trust and the way the school community functioned in response to crisis and the ongoing community needs. Of primary importance is the way certain factors of trust operate in the structures and functioning of leadership, and how that allows better responses to community needs in crisis. The most important factors of trust, which broke down in the immediate response to the crisis, were honesty, openness, and benevolence. When honesty, openness and benevolence are perceived to be a problem trust was very low. Low trust behaviors undermined good communication, decision making, and disrupted possible collaboration to solve problems. The technical and authoritarian focus of the superintendent could not bear the weight of a crisis that required the community to learn and change together. In the case of TLS trust is being rebuilt, leadership re-established, and they continue to learn, rebuild and reproduce a more functional community.

There were two notable shifts, characterized by low trust in stage one and increased trust in stage two. The first was a shift in focus from self to collective identity. During stage one, decision making, communication, and collaboration activities were focused on the self, or inward within the leadership, teachers, and parents. In stage two, the focus appeared to shift to the collective identity, led by the actions of the leadership team. The second was a shift from preservation and protection to learning. During stage one, decision making, communication, and collaboration activities appeared to build walls around individuals and groups within the community. During stage two, led by the leadership team, the focus shifted toward learning how to work together.

The shifts provide the basis for a model (see Figure 1) that offers both insight and implications for TLS leadership and the community. The first shift identified the transition of a focus on self to the collective, while the second shift identified the transition from preservation and protection to learning. When the focus of leadership and community members was on the self, preservation and protection were the goal, and trust for others was low. When the focus of leadership and the community was on the collective, learning was the goal, and trust was higher. While I cannot conclude that these dynamics caused each other to occur, it raises questions about how TLS might respond to future

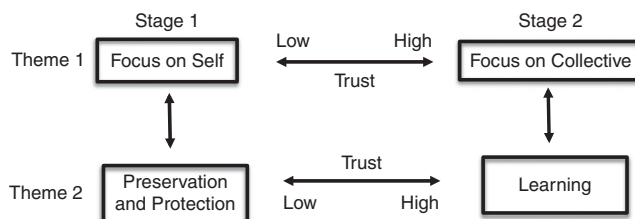


Figure 1.
Emergent themes

challenge or crises. What are leaders and community members focused on when crises or challenges occur?

It appears that the immediate responses tend to protect and preserve “‘myself’ and ‘what is mine.’” One cannot fault individuals or groups for such a perspective and behavior. That is an important response, especially for parents and community members directly involved and impacted by crisis or challenges. School leaders should support the needs of those individuals. However, when the entire community withdraws into a self-focus, the crisis wins the day. Can leaders call communities to focus on their collective identity and to learn again how to work together? In order to find meaning in crisis, we must trust each other and purpose to learn and grow together.

Community and trust

It is important to identify that the school and community response to crisis as complex rather than simplistic. It is an on-going process rather than a day or week or month following the crisis. It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a comprehensive explanation for the process TLS experienced, or for the experiences of crisis in other school communities. Rather, this study offers a visit into a community in crisis, to try to capture the dynamic and changing elements of social and behavioral elements at work in a school community.

A school community represents a unique locale. The locale is not represented by geography, but rather by the space and time and the production and reproduction of actors and actions or rites of passage. These rites are not merely mechanisms for social aggregation, but mechanisms for the production of local actors, local knowledge, and social forms (Appadurai, 1996). In short, a local community is involved in the production of social forms and rituals that include leadership types. While we often consider the influence of leadership on a community we must also consider the conditions of a community that invite, produce, and reproduce intentional types of leadership.

This mechanism for the production and reproduction of community leadership within a locale is vital for understanding organizational response to crisis because it recognizes the reciprocal nature of the relationship between leadership and community that can be described as an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The leadership a community looks for and produces is as important as actions and influence of a leader on a community. Often organizations and communities are comfortable with the status quo, which requires management of the technical aspects of leadership and a superficial one-way directional influence from leader to follower or community. In the case of TLS the culture of leadership before and at the beginning of the crisis was a traditional and technical form that operated from strict and linear lines of communication, chain-of-command decision-making, clear division of labor, and hierarchical and formal supervision (Morgan, 1997). This leadership form was as much created and facilitated by what the community wanted as it was created by the leaders themselves. When the technical form of leadership collapsed under the weight of the crisis, and left the community wanting for more. It is easy to lay the blame on an individual, but communities must embrace their role and responsibility in the leadership they want and select.

Furthermore, trust is characterized as a commodity (Dasgupta, 1988). During times of crisis it is too late to begin banking trust. The stores of trust must be there already, as a result of the way the school does business and the community functions. TLS leaders, and other school leaders, have to consider not so much whether or not they are prepared for a crisis to come. Rather, school leaders must consider what they are doing to build trust in every day school life through the way decisions are made, the nature of communication, and the extent to which they nurture a culture of collaboration.

Despite the positive progress TLS has made by learning and growing as a community, there remain gaps that may reflect further second order change needs. There continues to be

a lack of trust and sense of isolation with the expatriate Country B community and the local national Country A teacher community. In part, parent and teacher responses indicate there may be cultural differences in perceived trust and actual trust. Whereas the Western expatriate community may be exercising varying levels of trust, the local national community may be operating through cultural dynamics around loyalty and fictive kinship systems (Sutherland and Brooks, 2013) rather than trust. Likewise the expatriate Country B community may be operating through cultural dynamics of obligation. As one parent stated, "What choice do we have but to do what the school says?" Expatriate Country B parents believe that raising concerns about the school may harm its future, and thereby harm their children's educational future.

This study contributes to our understanding of trust in the difficult experiences of a crisis in a school community. Primarily, this study revealed that in the context of this case, without the stores of trust, the challenges of a crisis focused the school community stakeholders on protecting and preserving themselves, and prevented them from learning about themselves and growing from the crisis. When different leadership called the community together through positive communication and decision-making processes, evidence of trust emerged. This study is limited to the scope of the case of the TLS community, to a limited time frame following the crisis, and by the nature of the crisis. Additionally, the nature and limitations of the study does not lead to causal conclusions about responses and the nature of trust.

Future research could further explore the issues of trust and learning by using cross-case analysis to develop an understanding of trust and school and leader responses to crisis across individuals and contexts. Future research should also examine the concept of distrust (Lewicki *et al.*, 1998), a unique and separate concept from trust. How individuals and groups experience trust and distrust as separate concepts and separate perceptions raises important questions for schools and communities experiencing crisis. Future research should also address the dynamics of trust in contexts where different cultures meet and interact. How can the collective identity of a community cross over and integrate ethnic and cultural divides? How do the vulnerabilities of cultural subgroups within a school engage trust, especially under challenging circumstances? How can diverse communities learn to work together and trust each other? While a crisis provokes us to consider these questions, it becomes imperative to examine how schools like TLS might learn and grow together, even before crisis happens.

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