

2011

Assist Principals' Perspectives on Professional Learning Conversations for Teacher Professional Growth

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Assistant Principals' Perspectives on Professional Learning Conversations for Teacher
Professional Growth

by

Connie Kolosey

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
College of Education
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Date of Approval:
April 8, 2011

Keywords: communication protocols, distributed leadership, social constructivist
learning, teaching capacity, critical incident technique

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated in loving memory to Lester and Nadine Watkins, my wonderful and unique parents. When I look back through the mists of time, I see a self-assured 18-year-old girl sitting at a restaurant table explaining to her disappointed parents that she was not going to college. As time passed, they discovered that I would eventually see the light and pursue higher education; but they would not have envisioned that I would reach this landmark.

In admonishment to all parents everywhere: continue to love, support and encourage your children. You never know which parts of your message will light their path.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Bobbie Greenlee, my major professor, for a good balance of pressure and support. Your candid critique, willingness to listen and brainstorm, and suggestions for relevant resources made it possible for me to complete this project.

Thank you to Dr. Zorka Karanxha for serving on my committee and quietly telling me as we stood over refreshments one day that I would finish this degree. While you may not remember saying it, your vote of confidence echoed throughout the times I doubted.

Thank you to Dr. Darlene Brunner for serving on my committee and for being the chief encourager for our cohort. Your good-natured and common sense approach to life is inspiring.

Thank you to Dr. H. Roy Kaplan for serving on my committee and being that knowledgeable voice from outside of our department. Your suggestions for resources to influence my work were valuable and insightful. I appreciate your time.

Thank you to the members of my cohort. I literally would not have done this without you. I'm thankful for the friendships and support forged in this endeavor and look forward to many years of working with you as we wind our way through our careers. If you have yet to finish, I encourage you to press on. If you fall, fall forward. It can be done!

Thank you to my dear family, friends, congregational members, and work colleagues who endured five years of complaints, groaning, and distraction. I appreciate your interested inquires into how I was progressing and promises of a big celebration at the end. I look forward to spending relaxed time with you and not feeling guilty that I should be at home working on my dissertation.

Thank you to my sons Jacob, Jordan and Michael for your love, support, and understanding when I was preoccupied. I am very proud of the men you have become, and I encourage you to persevere to attain worthy goals.

Finally, thank you to my devoted husband Gary. Thanks for being my life long friend and always encouraging me to reach for my best potential. Thanks for giving me the time and space to pursue this degree. I look forward to getting back to our life, which is already in progress.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iv
List of Figures	v
Abstract	vi
Chapter I Introduction	1
Statement of the Research Problem	1
Conceptual Framework	3
Purpose of Study	6
Research Questions	8
Definition of Key Terms	9
Limitations and Delimitations of Study	12
Chapter II Literature Review	14
The Need For Professional Learning Conversations	15
Theories That Support Professional Learning Conversations	19
Distributed leadership	19
Social constructivist learning	27
Trust: A Pre-requisite For Professional Learning Conversations	29
Trust: conditions that create it	36
Trust: protocols that reduce risk	40
Feedback loops	43
The Appreciative Inquiry protocol	43
Peer coaching protocols	47
Concluding Comments	51
Chapter III Methodology	54
The Qualitative Interview	54
Critical Incident Technique	57
Participants	59
Identifying Participants	61
Data Collection Process	63
The written critical incident	64
The first interview	66
The second interview	66
Method of Data Analysis	68
Validity and Reliability	71
Ethical Considerations	73
Significance or Implications	74

Pilot Study.....	75
Timeline for Study.....	75
Chapter IV Analysis of the Data.....	77
Method.....	78
Research Questions.....	79
Participants.....	80
Data Analysis.....	85
Research Question One: What Are the Attitudes and Beliefs of These Assistant Principals Regarding Professional Learning Conversations as Structures to Support Professional Growth?.....	89
Attitudes and beliefs related to the general purposes of professional learning conversations.....	91
Attitudes and beliefs related to the physical and emotional structures of professional learning conversations.....	93
Attitudes and beliefs related to the APs' own professional orientation.....	97
Attitudes and beliefs related to the APs' orientation toward teachers.....	99
Research Question Two: How Do These Assistant Principals Perceive Their Role in Initiating or Facilitating Learning Conversations?.....	103
AP as a manager of school processes.....	103
AP as a resource to teachers.....	104
AP as a facilitator of the dialogue.....	106
AP as a co-learner with teachers.....	108
Research Question Three: How Do These Assistant Principals Identify Elements of Trust or Mistrust Within the Critical Incident Described?.....	112
Shared expectations as the initial stage of the trust building cycle.....	114
Managed risk as an element of the trust building cycle.....	115
Stability of the group as an element of the trust building cycle.....	116
Power structures as elements impacting the trust building cycle.....	118
Research Question Four: How Do These Assistant Principals Perceive Their Role or Influence in Building Trust or Mistrust?.....	124
Shared expectations as the initial stage of the trust building cycle.....	124
Managed risk as an element of the trust building cycle.....	125
Stability of the group as an element of the trust building cycle.....	127
Power structures as elements impacting the trust building cycle.....	128
Concluding Comments.....	132
Chapter V Summary and Discussion.....	136
Summary and Discussion of Findings.....	138
Research question one: What are the attitudes and beliefs of these assistant principals regarding professional learning conversations as structures to support professional growth?.....	138

Research question two: How do these assistant principals perceive their role in initiating or facilitating learning conversations?	140
Research question three: How do these assistant principals identify elements of trust or mistrust within the critical incident described?	143
Research question four: How do these assistant principals perceive their role or influence in building trust or mistrust	144
Limitations of Study	144
Implications for Practice	146
Concluding Comments.....	149
References.....	151
Appendices	158
Appendix A: Invitation to participate	159
Appendix B: Informed consent to participate in research	160
Appendix C: Critical Incident written response questions	163
Appendix D: First interview protocol.....	164
Appendix E: Second interview protocol.....	167

List of Tables

Table 1: Assistant Principals’ (AP) Demographic and Career Experience (exp.).....	83
Table 2: Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Reported by Participants Related to Research Question One Regarding the Assistant Principals’ Attitudes and Beliefs Toward Professional Learning Conversations	102
Table 3: Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Related to Research Question Two Regarding the Assistant Principals’ Perception of Their Roles in Initiating or Facilitating Professional Learning Conversations	111
Table 4: Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Related to Research Question Three Regarding the Assistant Principals’ Awareness of the Impact of Elements of Trust or Mistrust on Professional Learning Conversations.....	123
Table 5: Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Related to Research Question Four Regarding the Assistant Principals’ Perception of Their Role or Influence in Building Trust or Mistrust	131

List of Figures

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Diagram	6
Figure 2: The Four Phases of the AI Process	44

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discover, document, and describe the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, social structures and processes related to professional learning conversations from the perspective of nine assistant principals (APs). The participants were elementary, middle and high school APs, three at each level. Using a modified critical incident technique through participant written response and two in depth interviews with each respondent, this study investigated the lived experiences of these APs related to the practice of professional learning conversations in their schools. The research questions focused on: (1) the participants' beliefs and attitudes about professional learning conversations, (2) their roles in facilitating these conversations, (3) their ability to identify elements of trust within the groups of teachers with whom they work and (4) their roles in building trust.

The research literature is clear that teacher collaboration is a key factor in professional growth and self-efficacy, yet often the structure of the school day, a negative emotional environment, and a culture of teacher isolation prohibit meaningful teacher collaboration. Although faced with many obligations and directives, school administrators have considerable influence over the organizational structure within their individual schools. Furthermore, assistant principals often become the face of administration within their schools as they directly supervise teachers and APs are less studied than students, teacher or principals. How these individuals perceive and value

professional learning conversations will likely impact the level of collaboration at their individual schools.

The findings of this study indicate that professional learning conversations for teacher growth were more prevalent at the elementary school level, that trust may be more difficult to cultivate at the middle and high schools, and that protocols as structures for facilitating conversations and building trust were not widely in use.

A better understanding of the opportunities and barriers schools face related to professional learning conversations as well as a better understanding of the dynamics of trust will assist district and school administrators to engage in a problem solving process for better collaboration. Ultimately, administrators have an opportunity and a responsibility to touch the hearts and minds of the individuals on the front line of the work – the teachers in the classrooms working with students. Without teacher confidence, hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy, no amount of financial incentive, cajoling, or sanction will improve student learning.

Chapter I

Introduction

This descriptive, qualitative study investigated the lived experiences of nine assistant principals related to the practice of professional learning conversations in their schools. In this study, the term “professional learning conversation” was used to describe a professional dialogue that supports educators in reflecting upon their practice. Through the use of a modified critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954; Tripp, 1993; Woolsey, 1986) and in-depth interviewing (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Johnson, 2002), the researcher sought to discover the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, and social structure processes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) related to trust building within professional learning conversations from the perspective of a select group of assistant principals. This study added to existing literature by seeking to discover the unique perspectives of active assistant principals regarding professional learning conversations. This snapshot from the front line of implementation provided insight for future studies and for potential professional development needs.

Statement of the Research Problem

The research literature is clear that teacher collaboration is a key factor in professional growth and self-efficacy (Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Lambert, 1998), yet often the structure of the school day, a negative emotional environment, and a culture of teacher isolation prohibit meaningful teacher collaboration (Ingersoll, 2003; Kaplan,

2007; Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1994; Lambert, 1998; Rousmaniere, 1997). Although faced with many obligations and directives, school administrators have considerable influence over the organizational structure within their individual schools. From designing the master schedule to assigning teacher classrooms to planning professional development activities, structuring faculty meetings and modeling effective interpersonal communication, the structures the administrator puts in place facilitates either an effective or a dysfunctional learning environment for teachers and students. How the administrator perceives his responsibility and his opportunity or limitations in building teacher capacity will determine the extent to which he attempts to build structures that support teacher professional learning conversations. In other words, what they believe to be true will largely influence their actions (Parjares, 1992).

Some administrators may find the prospect of developing an instructionally focused collaborative culture daunting because they do not possess the expertise needed to be instructional leaders (Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Lambert, 1998). Others may be at a loss to manage the interpersonal conflicts that arise as people interact. For example, trust is a key element required for effective professional learning conversations. When colleagues share their ideas and practices, they open themselves up not only for critique, but also for potential misuse of the information they share. They make themselves vulnerable to each other. Without some level of trust, this is unlikely to happen. Building trust where it does not yet exist requires facilitation of a cyclical trust-building process (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Fortunately, trust building can start with a small amount of trust, or a provisional trust. If this controlled level of risk has positive results, individuals are more

likely to invest greater levels of risk in the future (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). If an administrator can build structures that require only a provisional level of trust, and manage the process in such a way that the results are positive, they have begun the trust-building process. While all administrators are faced with the challenge of finding ways to effectively handle the management and discipline problems that can consume every minute of every day, the gravitation to operational issues may indicate a leader who feels more comfortable working with more concrete and tangible tasks (Fullan, 2008b).

In large urban schools, the principal often assigns assistant principals to work directly with groups of teachers. For example, most large schools have a designated assistant principal for curriculum who designs the master schedule, not the principal. In these schools, it is typically the assistant principals who complete teacher evaluations and work directly with teachers, students and parents. Because of their direct involvement in the daily lives of teachers, this study sought to discover and describe the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, and social structures and processes related to professional learning conversations from the perspective of nine assistant principals.

Conceptual Framework

Current educational leadership literature provides a fairly uniform view that teacher growth (and thereby student success) is dependent upon professional development that allows teachers to work on their work together in collaborative relationships (Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998; Robbins, 1991; Showers & Joyce, 1996; Youngs & King, 2002). This view of professional development through professional learning conversations is consistent with

two established educational theories, one a learning theory and one a leadership theory. The social constructivist learning theory suggests that humans make meaning as a function of their collective learning brought about by the interaction of the group rather than as individuals (Lewin as cited in Gold, 1998; Palinscar, 1998; Sivan, 1986). Humans, whether young students in the classroom or adult colleagues, learn best when we have the opportunity to interact with new ideas in collaboration with peers.

In a school setting, when teachers talk with each other about their work, sharing teaching strategies, studying student work, reviewing data, or planning for school improvement, their combined thinking constructs new learning. This powerful learning environment also connects to the leadership distribution within a school. When faculties (teachers and administrators) become actively involved in learning discussions, a common vision and common goals emerge. Through this process, more people have the opportunity to impact leadership decisions. Therefore, in addition to supporting the social constructivist theory of learning, the view of professional development through professional learning conversations is also consistent with a distributed leadership theory.

According to distributed leadership theory, every organizational structure includes some form of leadership distribution (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). This distribution furthers organizational goals when it is in planned alignment, and hinders organizational growth when it is not (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). Planned alignment occurs when the various formal and informal leaders in the organization share a common vision and are working toward common goals. Authentically held common vision and goals are

developed through collaborative processes (Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998). In this way, professional learning conversations meet at the intersection of the social constructivist and distributed leadership theories in that when these conversations are focused on personal and organizational learning, planned alignment increases and instructional practice improves.

These theories can help us think about and understand the dynamics of *why* professional learning conversations build teaching capacity; however, these theories do not explain *how* to bring people with diverse perspectives and experiences together to collaborate in a meaningful way. In fact, there are prerequisite conditions that must be in place to create a collaborative culture (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk 1994; Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998). These conditions include a positive working environment with clear goals and objectives, a work day structured to allow time and space for collaboration, a sense of value and respect for employees, and facilitative leaders who understand the dynamics of human discourse. These are the conditions that build the trust required for people to risk the vulnerability of collaboration. Building trust leads to increased professional responsibility, increased self-efficacy, an environment of continuous growth, and program continuity because trust undergirds the conditions under which professional learning conversations can flourish. (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1994; Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998). When teachers are learning and growing professionally, they are more likely to help their students learn and grow.

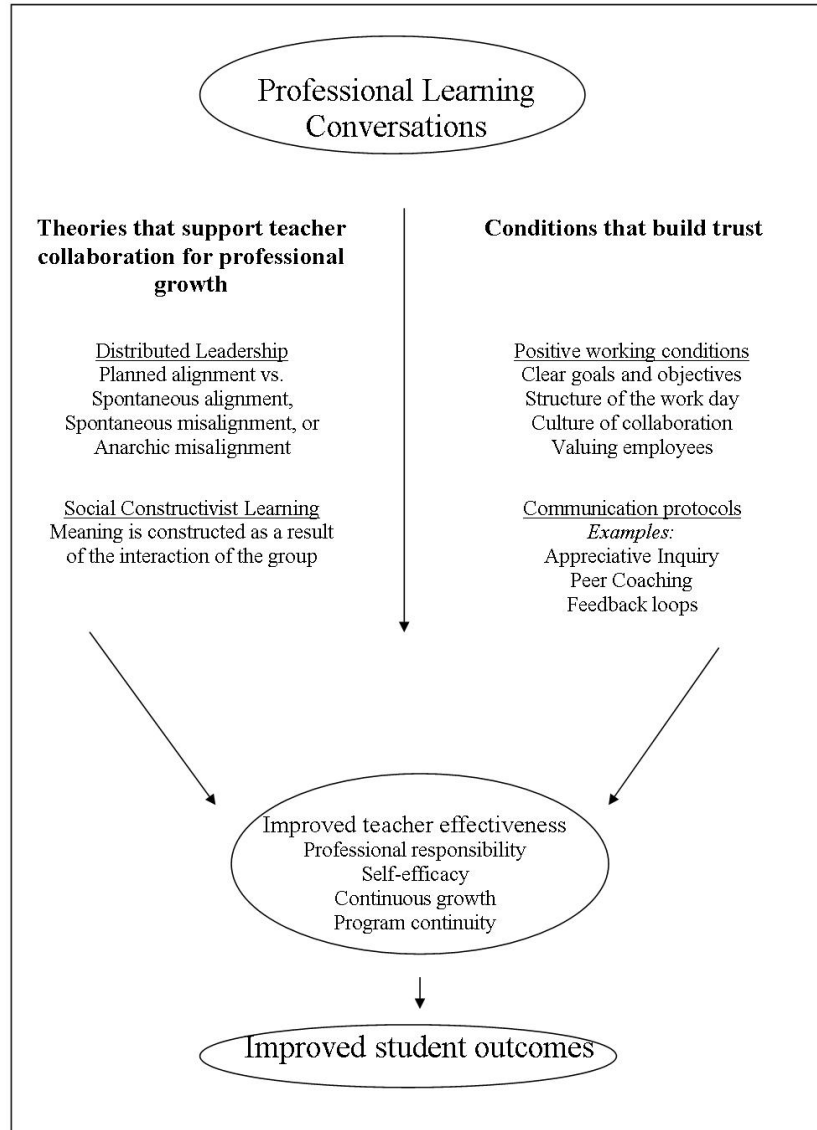


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Diagram

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to discover how these assistant principals perceive and value professional learning conversations related their self-efficacy to initiate and facilitate teacher collaboration. This study did not address the effectiveness of professional learning conversations for professional growth, but rather, what these

participants believed to be true. This insight is important because assistant principals often become the face of administration in the implementation and translation of policy and school improvement initiatives. Researchers, state or federal departments of education, district office personnel, or even the principal of the school may declare professional learning conversations critical for the growth of teachers, but the individuals on the front line of implementation must share the vision if it is to become a reality. Assistant principals are a key part of leadership distribution within the school, yet they are often overlooked in research (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

In this front line role, assistant principals may influence the implementation of professional learning conversations in their schools in part by the ways they contribute to positively or negatively to trust building in the school community. Trust is a critical component of professional learning conversations, and trust can be either enhanced or hindered by the structure of the organization (Blase & Blase, 2001; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Mascal, Leithwood, Straus & Sacks, 2008; Robbins, 1991; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). For this reason, school administrators need to manage a trust building cycle (Vangen & Huxham, 2003) in order to consciously seek a planned alignment of the work of the various formal and informal leaders within their school (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). Administrators can build trust by structuring the work day to include time and space for collaboration and by creating an emotional climate that manages the personal risk inherent when teachers openly discuss and reflect up their work together. (Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Krause, Louis & Bryk, 1994; Lambert, 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

One type of strategy that can be used to manage personal risk in professional learning conversations is to provide conversation structures, or protocols (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter & McDonald, 2007). Examples of protocols discussed in this study, are feedback loops, Appreciative Inquiry and peer coaching. Feedback loops provide a coordinated administrative plan to share and receive information in one on one conversations with faculty members (Lambert, 1998). Appreciative Inquiry (Holland & Markova, 2005; Whitney, 1998; Yballe & O'Connor, 2000) provides a structure and a set of principles that can assist organizations in program assessment, goal setting, and action plan development. Peer coaching models (Allen & LeBlanc, 2005; Robbins, 1991; Showers & Joyce, 1996) provide a protocol to break down the norm of isolation found in many schools that hinders professional learning conversations. Feedback loops, Appreciative Inquiry and peer coaching are examples of protocols that can be used to build trust and create a planned alignment of distributed leadership. This study sought to discover how these assistant principals perceive their role in initiating and facilitating professional learning conversations and in managing trust building processes.

Research Questions

1. What are the attitudes and beliefs of these assistant principals regarding professional learning conversations as structures to support professional growth?
 - a. How does the structure (context, data sources, protocols, focus and impact) of the incident described indicate this perspective?
2. How do these assistant principals perceive their role in initiating or facilitating learning conversations?

- a. What barriers do they identify?
 - b. What opportunities do they recognize?
3. How do these assistant principals identify elements of trust or mistrust within the critical incident described?
 - a. To what degree did participants exhibit shared expectations?
 - b. Were structures in place to manage risk levels for the participants?
 - c. How did group stability or instability influence the incident?
 - d. How did power structures within the group influence the incident?
4. How do these assistant principals perceive their role or influence in building trust or mistrust?
 - a. What barriers do they identify?
 - b. What opportunities do they recognize?

Definition of Key Terms

Professional learning conversations. The term professional learning conversation was used in this study to refer to professional dialogue that supports educators in reflecting upon their practice. These conversations may occur between pairs or groups of educators and are focused upon teaching and learning. These conversations might include peer coaching, curriculum mapping, lesson planning discussion, reflection on a recent teaching or learning experience, study of student work, school improvement planning or data analysis.

Critical Incident technique. This research technique asks participants to describe a seemingly ordinary event related to the topic of study. The reflection on the incident described provides insight into the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of the individual.

Organizational structure. Organizational structure refers to the way of work within an organization. This includes the distribution of leadership, the flow of information, the structure of the workday, the formation of work groups, and the norms, assumptions, and culture of the organization.

Teaching capacity. Teaching capacity is the relative strength of the instructional staff of the school, including content and pedagogical knowledge and the ability to translate that knowledge into successful teaching and learning relationships in the classroom.

Distributed leadership. This study assumed that every organization has both formal and informal leaders. Formal leaders are those who have been given specific leadership titles or roles. Informal leaders are those who have been recognized by members of the organization as possessing knowledge or power to impact change. These leaders are either working together toward a shared vision; co-existing without a shared vision; unwittingly working against each other; or in the most dysfunctional arrangement, knowingly working against each other.

Planned alignment. Planned alignment refers to the most productive scenario of distributed leadership and occurs when both formal and informal leaders are working together toward a shared vision with common goals.

Protocols. Protocols are conversation structures that increase the productivity of the dialogue. Protocols establish the purpose for meeting, establish effective ground rules

for interacting, and enable colleagues to share information openly, while attending to one another's perspective. Different protocols are used depending upon the desired outcome of the exchange, upon leadership style, upon the needs of the group and upon the time allotted for discussion.

Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry is a protocol that has been used by business, philanthropic, and educational organizations around the world to plan or improve programs. The process is designed to identify the best of what currently exists or has occurred in the past in order to identify the elements of those experiences that can help define future vision and goals, and to inform a plan to implement and sustain that vision.

Peer coaching. Peer coaching, in its various forms, is another protocol that establishes a norm of collaboration for professional learning conversations. While several adaptations of the concept have been widely used, the shared element is that teachers visit one another's classrooms and discuss what was observed for the purpose of learning from each other.

Feedback loops. A process by which each of the leadership team members within a school become responsible for a group of six to eight faculty members. The leadership team members initiate on-going conversations that occur over the space of a week. The purpose is to plant new ideas in a one on one setting and solicit the thinking and reactions to these ideas.

Trust. For the purposes of this study, trust referred to the degree to which collaborative partners are willing to engage in collegial conversations based on the belief that the other person or people will work towards a common good, and not do harm.

Limitations and Delimitations of Study

One potential threat to the validity of this study was related to the dangers inherent in any in depth interview study. Namely, that the success of the study rested on the quality of data the researcher was able to obtain from the participants (Maxwell, 2005). This quality might have been influenced by the interviewing skill of the researcher, the willingness of the participant to share, or the knowledge of the participant on the topic (Johnson, 2002). It would have been possible to get to the end of the data collection process only to discover that the written critical incident and the interviews did not provide sufficient data upon which to draw conclusions regarding these assistant principal's belief and attitudes toward professional learning conversations. However, the study was designed to guard against this possibility in that there were three opportunities to delve deeply into the topic (the written statement and two interviews). The interview protocols were adjusted as necessary to ensure rich data was obtained. In addition, it was possible that one or more of the participants would have been reluctant to share their true beliefs and attitudes. This concern was addressed by the study design that allowed for a discussion of a specific event rather than a conversation about general beliefs. It was anticipated that beliefs and attitudes would become apparent through the reflection on the critical incident. Finally, it was imperative that participants be knowledgeable on the topic. Professional Learning Communities were a mandated for all schools through the State of Florida's Differentiated Accountability model and these participants were experienced assistant principals who had completed or were enrolled in the District's principal preparation program. They were selected because they had both knowledge of and experience with this topic.

A second limitation that was specific to this study was the decision to focus on assistant principals. This focus in no way implied that the building principal was not the primary power holder in the structure of the school. As the individual with the formal title of top leadership the principal clearly holds more influence and responsibility than an assistant. No matter how proactive and committed to developing emotional and physical structures that support professional learning conversations an assistant principal might be, if this effort was not supported or at least tolerated by the principal, the efforts would not succeed. However, the front line role of assistant principals in working with teachers and the fact that this group is often overlooked in research made their perspective especially valuable.

A delimitation of this study was the small sample size required for practical reasons by the in depth interview methodology. Whatever insight was gained was specific to these individuals and should not be generalized to a greater population. However, the results of this study potentially provided a basis for forming further research questions to be examined in future studies and could have suggested the need for further professional development for the assistant principals themselves.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The following literature review examined the literature related to professional learning conversations aimed at building teaching capacity in schools. This review included a description of and the importance and challenge of professional learning conversations; discussed two theories that support teacher collaboration for professional growth; and explored the role of trust in creating a collaborative culture and conditions and protocols that build trust.

Assumptions embedded in this review included:

1. Many schools are not as successful as we would like them to be at helping all students achieve their highest potential.
2. The way to improve student performance is to improve classroom practice.
3. The way to improve classroom practice is through professional learning conversations where teachers talk about their work, look at examples of student work, visit each other's classrooms and work together to implement techniques learned through professional development activities (constructivist learning).
4. The emotional and physical structure of schools often prevents these conversations.
5. Trust is a critical dimension of effective learning conversations, and trust can be created or diminished.

6. When teachers take on increased responsibility for their own professional growth, the leadership capacity of the school expands adding stability and longevity to innovations (distributed leadership).
7. The role of the school-based administrator is to build the leadership capacity of the school by minimizing the physical and emotional barriers that prevent professional learning conversations (trust building).

The representative studies selected for this review were chosen based on the extent to which they informed these assumptions through corroboration or caution. The findings of this literature review supported a study that sought to discover the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, and social structures processes related to professional learning conversations from the perspective of a select group of assistant principals.

The Need for Professional Learning Conversations

Much of the structure of schools is designed to resist change and maintain the status quo (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Too often even the best intentions and innovations get lost in a self-sustaining bureaucratic system of poor implementation. As Postman and Weingartner (1969) point out, bureaucracies “are by their nature highly resistant to change...there is an essential mindlessness about them which causes them, in most circumstances, to accelerate entropy rather than to impede it” (p. 12).

In his book, *Who Controls Teachers' Work*, Richard Ingersoll (2003) looks at schools as employment organizations. Given that the field of education represents four percent of the civilian workforce in the United States, organizational analysis as it applies to schools has implications for the management of other industries as well. He asserts that

many studies document the problems schools face, however, not all schools suffer from these problems equally. The degree to which schools experience difficulties is directly related to the distribution of power within the school. In a discussion on teacher retention, Ingersoll states that a focus on teacher recruitment to solve the teacher shortage problem diverts “attention from the primary underlying problem – the manner in which teachers and schools are managed...schools are not simply victims of large-scale, inexorable demographic trends...there is a significant role for the management of schools in both the genesis and solution of school staffing problems” (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 525).

The norm of isolation found in many schools contradicts the hope of professional learning (Goddard, Goddard & Tschannen-Moran, 2007). One teacher from Colorado told a story of how something as simple as the fire marshal’s directive to close the doors between classrooms cut off a valued professional learning dialogue (Robbins, 1991). Another teacher attended the retirement party of colleague and heard rich stories of how this woman had impacted the lives of her students, of her creativity and of her dedication. The party guest felt saddened by the fact that she had not had opportunity to learn from this experienced educator.

It was simply that the school where she taught had no avenues for developing a shared knowledge base about teaching. Teachers went about the business of teaching in a congenial way. But the talk in the teachers’ lounge was about good restaurants, social events, and sports – not about teaching practices and their consequences. Thus, as in many schools, much of the expertise in individual classrooms remained well-kept secrets to the rest of the staff. (Robbins, 1991, p. 9)

Kaplan (2007) sheds light on some of the consequences of teacher isolation and the difficulties teachers face when asked to interact with each other. He enumerates the job frustration and lack of professional prestige experienced by many public school teachers, and cites examples from individual teachers he has encountered who feel hopeless, fearful and isolated their jobs. Kaplan suggests that changes in the American culture that have occurred since the current middle-aged teaching staff was in school, but the process of teaching has changed little. Although the teaching process and the structure of school have changed little, the students hold a very different worldview. “Most teachers have been trained in the Eurocentric tradition with its emphasis on lecture, conformity, and obedience to authority” (p. 106). In addition, part of the ineffectiveness of schools to adequately teach comes from the unwillingness or inability of the teachers to seek out new strategies and open lines of communication between teachers and between teachers and students. This feeling of hopelessness, isolation and malaise leads to older teachers counting the days until retirement and to younger teachers seeking other employment. He discusses his experiences with faculty retreats designed to initiate dialogue between faculty members, and to break down the walls of negative assumptions, veiled prejudices, and hurt feelings. He maintains that as teachers begin to open lines of communication to end the professional isolation so many feel, they will not only be better able to model more civility and tolerance for their students but will find more hope and fulfillment in their work. Kaplan asserts, “we all have stories, and we need to tell them” (p. 126).

The concept of teacher collaboration has been widely discussed, but in fact includes many different definitions. Lavie (2006) conducted a literature review to

distinguish among five types of teacher collaboration discourses: cultural discourse, school effectiveness and improvement discourses, school-as community discourses, restructuring discourses and critical discourses. While it is impossible to uniquely distinguish each of the five constructs because of overlap among them, Lavie argues that we must look critically as we consider the various approaches to understand the underlying values and assumptions of each. In a continuum of the approaches some may lead to “substantive transformation” of the educational system, or others may amount to doing the same old things more effectively. When discussing teacher collaboration, it is far more important to determine the “what for” than to define the “how to.” Lavie maintains that we cannot understand the purpose of collaboration without understanding it in the context of the broader purpose of school and teachers’ work. He cautions against simply reframing the terminology to maintain the status quo.

McDonald, Mohr, Dichter and McDonald (2007) provide three reasons for engaging in professional learning conversations: for the educator’s own professional growth; for the benefit of their colleagues to learn from the educator’s knowledge and experience; and ultimately for the increased achievement of their students. It is critical that we continue to learn and grow, but to do this we must direct our learning to meet the specific needs of our unique environment. However, while much of the work of an educator is done in isolation, the efforts and outcomes of our colleagues impact our own effort and outcomes. What our colleagues do in their classrooms impacts the students we share and the school as a community. Since we share concerns, we must recognize that the solutions cannot be found in our isolation. Unfortunately, the norms of most educational institutions do not include organizational structures that invite

open and honest conversation; meeting habits that support inquiry, dialogue and reflection; opportunities for those immersed in particular work to take direct action to improve it; and facilitative leadership capable of encouraging participation, ensuring equity, and building trust. (p. 2)

Professional learning conversations create time and space for critical reflection, rational discourse, and learning as transformation (York & Marsick, 2000). They lead to improved instruction, and therefore, improved student outcomes (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). If it is determined that staff development should be the primary tool for school improvement, schools must consider the organizational structures that will support teachers in working together, making time and providing structure for professional learning conversations (Showers & Joyce, 1996; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Theories That Support Professional Learning Conversations

Distributed leadership

Distributive leadership theory recognizes that in every organization there are both formal and informal leaders. There are those leaders who have been given official leadership titles and salaries, and there are leaders that rise up from within the ranks. In a school setting this may be teachers, support staff and students who influence the culture and activities within a school (Allix & Gronn, 2005). This theory supports the idea that effective leadership is not so much about the personal characteristics or style of the leader but rather the organizational structures the leader puts in place. “The model of the singular, heroic leader is at last being replaced with leadership that is focused upon teams rather than individuals...” (Harris & Spillane, 2008, p. 31).

Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon, and Yashkima (2007) have identified four patterns of leadership distribution that vary along two continuums. The first ranges from planned to unplanned leadership distribution. The second ranges from aligned to misaligned leadership distribution. *Planned alignment* indicates a structure in which the vision, goals, and activities of the organization are proactively coordinated and articulated such that multiple leaders contribute to the success of the organization. *Spontaneous alignment* indicates a less effective model in which, without thoughtful coordination, the organization functions fairly well without major disruption. It is doubtful that this model will function long before it devolves into the third model, *spontaneous misalignment*. As the name suggests, *spontaneous misalignment* creates a haphazard organizational structure resulting in little productivity. The fourth leadership distribution pattern, *anarchic misalignment*, occurs when sub-units, such as high school subject area departments, conduct planning that is not aligned to the vision, goals, and activities of the larger organization creating a competitive or oppositional environment.

Mascall, Leithwood, Straus and Sacks (2008) examined how each of these patterns impacted teachers' academic optimism. Their definition of academic optimism includes a combination of trust, collective efficacy and academic emphasis. Not surprisingly, the distribution pattern of *planned alignment* was positively linked with higher degrees of teacher academic optimism and each of the other distribution patterns related progressively less, with *anarchic misalignment* as the least conducive to teacher optimism. It appears to be likely that the organizational structure of the school impacts how teachers feel about and consequently perform their jobs.

Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) found that school leaders impact teaching and learning indirectly through motivation, commitment, and working conditions; school leadership has a greater influence when it is widely distributed; and that some patterns of distribution are more effective than others. According to Leithwood and his colleagues (2008), the three key components for improving instructional practice are building teaching capacity, motivation and commitment, and working conditions. However, the largest impact on altered practices comes from building teacher capacity. Unfortunately, the research review of Leithwood and his colleagues indicates that school leaders have little direct impact on building teacher capacity. These authors suggest that in order for a single leader to directly build teacher capacity the leader would need to possess an unrealistic level of specific content knowledge. Therefore, while building teacher capacity is critical, it is not likely to be the school leader who will facilitate this growth directly. Instead, school leaders have the most direct impact on teacher working conditions, but even working conditions only have a small impact on altered practices. It appears that the most direct impact for school leaders comes through motivation and commitment. Leaders have a moderate impact on motivation and commitment, and in turn motivation and commitment have a moderate impact on altered instructional practices (and thereby pupil learning and achievement). While the impact of the school leader on student learning is indirect, Leithwood and his colleagues find it to be significant. They state that recent studies in England and America have indicated the powerful role of teacher motivation on student learning, and teacher motivation is shaped by their level of commitment, sense of efficacy, morale, job satisfaction, and ability to handle stress.

Furthermore, school leadership has a greater influence on student learning when it is widely distributed throughout the school. To support this claim, Leithwood and his colleagues looked at the impact of “total leadership” instead of looking at the impact of just one leader. Total leadership includes individual teachers, teacher teams, parents, district office staff, students and assistant principals – as well as the principal. They found that total leadership has significant impact on capacity building, motivation and commitment, and working conditions, all factors that positively impact student learning. Finally, there is evidence to indicate that some forms of distributed leadership are more effective than others. To date most of the support for this has come from private sector organizations rather than from school data, however, the indication is that *planned alignment* of leadership positively impacts teachers’ academic optimism (Mascal, et al., 2008).

Leadership in any organization is not confined to the individual or individuals who have been given the formal title. Allix and Gronn (2005) build the case that leadership roles change according to the context. Those that are legitimately perceived by “followers” to be leaders have recognized that changes are occurring, will occur, or need to occur and move to take action upon that recognition. By taking action for change these leaders define the organizational knowledge by their own perceptions and actions. Leaders are able to organize the various nuances of a situation because they understand what is going on around them, understand that others perceive them to be a leader, understand what can and should be done given the context of the situation, and understand how to effectively use available resources. Therefore, leadership becomes a manifestation of knowledge, and the individual with this knowledge may or may not be

the person with the title. In some cases, there is no clear line between who is a leader and who is a follower. These titles are likely to change based on different contexts. Some people may even be both leaders and followers simultaneously (Allix & Gronn, 2005).

However, traditionally a leader has been considered an authoritative figure who knows all of the answers and makes all of the decisions or a benevolent shepherd who protects the employees from discomfort (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Heifetz and Laurie seek to redefine these traditional concepts. There is a fine balance that the leader must maintain between overwhelming employees with the magnitude of the job at hand and letting people understand the need for change and the nature of the challenges that lie ahead. These authors see that leaders often err in treating organizational challenges that require systemic change as technical problems that can be solved by applying an appropriate strategy. The downfall of this thinking is that it leaves the leader to solve the problem and does not consider the perspectives of people closer to the work. The idea of the leaders formulating the vision and then asking the employees to align to that vision reduces leadership “to a combination of grand knowing and salesmanship” (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, p. 13). Instead, organizational challenges that require systemic change require all members of the organization to take responsibility for finding creative solutions. Leadership is an on-going process that requires a culture that allows employees to become “leaders from below...with or without authority” (p. 14). While this shift in thinking may be difficult for an authoritative leader to accept, it can also free the administrator from the pressure of needing to provide all of the answers (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Lambert, 1998).

Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) also present the concept of leadership not as a focus on one individual's personal characteristics or skill but rather the activity or practice of leadership as it interacts with the leader or group of leaders, the followers, and the situation. These researchers look at how leadership practice is distributed among formal leaders, informal leaders, and their followers, and they see distributive leadership as a "multiplicative" model rather than "additive." The product of the group thinking and activity is greater than the sum of the individual contributions. The focus is on the interdependence of the leaders, followers, and the situation. In any leadership structure, the relationship between leader and follower is a negotiated order. The leader must conform his leadership style and activities to meet the needs and attitudes of the one who follows, and the "followers may influence leadership strategies by finding subtle ways to resist administrative controls through creative insubordination" (Spillane, et al., 2004, p. 19). In this distributed leadership model, followers become a part of the leadership activity.

Maxcy and Nguyen (2006) applied the Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004) distributed leadership model to a case study of an elementary school in Texas. Through the process, they learned that while the Spillane model provided a helpful concept and language shift, it did not adequately explain the complexity of political factors involved when trying to apply the concept. They tell the story of a Vietnamese language and culture (VLC) program at Pecan Springs Elementary School in Texas started by a wealthy Vietnamese immigrant to address the needs of Vietnamese refugee students. Over time, Vietnamese families from surrounding areas sought to get their children into the program. The VLC functioned with little support from the district and with marginal

facilities. The teachers developed the program with input from parents, creativity, collaboration, and in part by side-stepping district and school policies for student placement. When the students excelled on the state standardized test, the district touted the program as a shining example of the district's sensitivity to minority communities. Yet, the teachers were rated poorly on their annual evaluations for lack of professional learning community involvement because they ran an after school tutoring program which conflicted with the meetings scheduled by the school administration. Meanwhile, they worked among themselves as a professional learning community coordinating curriculum, discussing student progress, and conducting community outreach. Clearly, this program was a distributed leadership success story in terms of student success, and the teachers' self-efficacy, motivation, and commitment, even if the elements of leadership exhibited went largely unappreciated by the formal school and district leaders. Maxcy and Nguyen contend that while educational reformers espouse decentralization and involving stakeholders in decision making, often this amounts to little more than rhetoric that in the end reframes the language, but maintains the status quo. They suggest that those espousing a distributed leadership model must take care not to underestimate the political complexity of schools (Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006).

In her book *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools*, Lambert (1998) like others, seeks to move away from the concept of a single leader who controls the work of a school. Lambert maintains that distributed leadership helps build the stability of programs. When school leadership is focused on a strong principal figure or on several key teachers, the innovations or reforms that might be implemented fall subject to instability when inevitable personnel changes occur. For the faculty that remain, changes

in leadership that result in a change in or loss of focus creates discouraged and cynical teachers when the momentum is lost. For this reason Lambert contends that the key to continuity, maintaining momentum, and self-renewal is to build leadership capacity. She proposes a conceptual framework for building leadership capacity which is based on five key assumptions: (1) leadership is not based on the traits of a specific leader, but rather on the reciprocal learning process – reflection, inquiry, dialogue, and action; (2) this learning process occurs collectively and moves toward a shared purpose; (3) the term “collectively” implies that all members of the community are potentially involved in leadership; (4) thus, the learning process must be shared in order for the purpose and action to be achieved; (5) this process redistributes both power and authority (Lambert, 1998). In this model, the work of the principal changes dramatically. The role is not diminished, but rather more complex than ever before. “It is more difficult to build leadership capacity among colleagues than to tell colleagues what to do” (p. 24). Unfortunately, the skills required for this type of leadership are not routinely taught in administrative preparation programs nor valued among sitting administrators. A more typical leadership role is one that Lambert refers to as “codependency” where the teachers are accustomed to expecting administrators to clarify the goals, programs and processes and then following directions (or subversively choosing not to follow the directions). Instead of this dependency model, Lambert calls for administrators to develop an “adult-to-adult relationship” with teachers. The work of the administrator then becomes to use the leader’s appointed authority to establish processes that builds leadership capacity of the school by convening and sustaining the conversation. This amounts to a redistribution of authority and power so that the culture of peers can grow.

Social constructivist learning

The social constructivist learning theory provides a framework by which to gain insight into how formal and informal leaders, followers, and teams interact to build or reduce teaching and learning capacity within a school. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky is primarily identified with the social constructivist theory which looks at the role of social processes in learning (Palincsar, 1998). This theory suggests that people view their role(s) based on how they interpret their own experiences both past and present and their vision of the future. Those views are shaped and changed by interactions with others. As a theory of cognitive development, social constructivism places the making of meaning as a function of the collective learning brought about by the interaction of the group rather than the individual (Gold, 1998; Sivan, 1986; Woolfolk Hoy & Hoy, 2003). Teacher professional development research is clear that isolated in-service workshops where teachers passively receive information, but have little opportunity to practice or apply the new information do little to change classroom practice. Instead, teachers learn as they talk to one another about their work and the new information they have gained (Palincsar, 1998; Showers & Joyce, 1996).

In 1943, Kurt Lewin accurately predicted that in the future large organizations that deal with people (such as school systems) would conduct research on group dynamics in the same way they did at that time on chemistry and physics (Gold, 1998). Lewin's research on groups laid the groundwork for much of our current understanding about the impact of groups on the individual members. His research found that group interaction influences the internal structures of each group member. Furthermore, group decisions take precedent in individual behavior over the individual's personal

inclinations. This dynamic occurs not from treating the individual as an individual, but rather from treating the individual as a group member. Individuals are “re-educated” to group norms as they interact with other members of the group. Lewin found that individuals, if left alone, will not form themselves into democratic groups (planned alignment). This fact highlights the importance of leadership. Without intervention, it is more likely that the chaos of unplanned misalignment, or the establishment of an autocratic dominance (planned misalignment) will occur. The leader must educate the individual regarding the expected responsibility toward the group and in consideration of the feelings of others. The group leader encourages the group structure and models appropriate behavior in the group, but leaves the group to structure their work. Lewin’s research determined that democratic procedures may raise group’s efficiency. However, he distinguished group discussions from group decisions. Discussions about decisions can help, but discussions alone do not increase efficiency. It is group decisions that lead to increased efficiency (Gold, 1998).

Related to the social constructivist learning theory, Mezirow (2000), presents adult learning as a transformational process brought about by reflective discourse. Mezirow’s (2000) learning as transformation theory suggests that as adult learners engage in dialogue that not only seeks to solve problems and implement solutions, but also to examine underlying assumptions, “habits of the mind” are transformed leading to changed behavior and practice (Mezirow, 2000; Yorks & Marsick, 2000). However, this transformational process requires that learners come to the dialogue with certain “democratic habits of the heart” which include a willingness to seek understanding and build consensus, an openness to alternative points of view, an awareness of the context of

ideas, an equal opportunity to participate, and freedom from coercion and power struggles (Mezirow, 2000).

Trust: A Pre-Requisite for Professional Learning Conversations

There is a growing body of research that indicates that social trust is a key ingredient in the implementation of school reform (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy 2000). The research of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) examines the importance of trust specifically in schools. They assert that trust plays a key role in the social processes that occur between teachers, between teachers and administrators, between teachers and students and between schools and the community. In fact, trust impacts communication, collaboration, school climate, organizational citizenship, the quantity and nature of rules established, the collective efficacy of faculty, the achievement of students, and overall school effectiveness. Bryk and Schneider (2002) assert that trust “lubricates the necessary social exchanges among school professionals as they engage together, learning from each other in the trial and error of implementing new practice” (p. 123). Tschannen-Moran (2004) also likens trust to a lubricant (like oil in a car engine) that enables adult learners to engage in reflective discourse without friction that causes overheating or a freezing up of the system. With an increased focus on accountability measures such as pay based on student performance and differentiated pay for teachers in high needs schools, teachers are being asked to implement fundamental changes in instructional practice based on teamwork and collaboration. These expectations bring the need to examine the impact of trust to the forefront.

Researchers in psychology, sociology, philosophy, economics, and human resource development have also taken an interest in the dynamics of trust within organizations (Kramer, 1999; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). In a review of research on trust, Kramer (1999) defines trust as a psychological state involving both rational choice and relational experiences on the part of the trustee. “Trust entails a state of perceived vulnerability or risk that is derived from individuals’ uncertainty regarding the motives, intentions, and prospective actions of others on whom they depend” (Kramer, 1999, p. 571). In addition to the element of vulnerability to another, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) describe trust as being multifaceted or possessing “five faces.” These faces include benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty and openness.

When conceived as a rational choice, trust becomes a conscious calculation of advantages that includes the knowledge that it is in the trustee’s best interest to behave in a manner worthy of the trustor’s trust. It is easier to trust when you believe that another person will act in your best interest because it is in his or her best interest to do so. However, evidence suggests that models of trust as a strictly rational choice overstate the rationality of trust decisions and under estimate the role of emotionality and social influences. A more complete understanding of how the two models interact includes consideration of the context involved. Kramer (1999) suggests that there are three parts of trust: properties of the trustor; properties of the trustee; and specific contexts. For example, when determining appropriate trust levels with strangers the considerations would be more calculative. However, when determining appropriate trust levels within one’s own group, the considerations would be based on more relational factors.

Individuals have varying degrees of general predisposition to trust others based on their previous trust related experiences (Kramer, 1999; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Vangen and Huxham, 2003). People who grow up in a consistent environment where caregivers follow through on promises and expectations, are more likely to develop trusting dispositions. Furthermore, these individuals tend to be more trustworthy themselves. Although, this disposition to trust does not equate to gullibility, rather, these people have learned through experience that outcomes are more positive when they start from a premise that others will not intentionally cause them harm (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Trust is a dynamic phenomenon that ebbs and flows as parties interact with each other over time. In the initial stages, trust is built on rules and institutional structures. As the relationship progresses, it is based on knowledge and personal history. Finally, at a mature level, it can be based upon personal understanding and empathy, becoming unconditional (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). The level of trust between two individuals who interact with each other grows or declines as the dispositions, intentions, and motives of the other person become clear through repeated interactions. One key factor in building trust is reciprocity. When expected reciprocity occurs, trust increases. When it does not, trust erodes. This history based trust is a key factor in organizations. The individual's prior experiences form initial trust judgments and these judgments are updated as new experiences accumulate (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Kramer, 1999).

Third parties can play an important role in building or diffusing trust. When an individual does not have adequate information upon which to form a judgment, the assessment of the third party can help. However, the information isn't always accurate

because people tend to tell others what they think they want to hear, overinflating a positive view or further undermining an already negative view. Nonetheless, the stories shared by others tend to solidify opinions and levels of trust or mistrust (Kramer, 1999; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Kramer's literature review (1999) identifies several forms of presumptive, depersonalized trust: category-based trust, role-based trust, and rule-based trust. Category-based trust refers to trust conferred solely by membership within a particular group, rather than on an individual characteristic or experience. With category-based trust, individuals tend to trust members of their "in group" and distrust members of the "out group." Role-based trust is conferred based on the individual's role in the organization rather than on their capabilities, dispositions, motives and intentions. Role-based trust is rooted in the assumption that the mechanisms in place to allow that individual to assume the role provide safe guards to ensure proper functioning in the position. An example would be the role of the medical doctor who we may not know personally, but trust because he or she has passed all of the requirements to become a doctor. However, within an organization, this role-based trust can be very fragile and a breakdown of cooperation and coordination can occur in crisis or novel situations when typical roles and scripts become less defined (Kramer, 1999).

Rule-based trust is based on an established and agreed upon set of normative behaviors. These "explicit rules and tacit understandings function to create and sustain high levels of mutual trust within an organization" (Kramer, 1999, p. 579). Within rule-based trust, members trust not just in the expertise of individuals but in a system of expertise. When organizations develop rules that express trust in their members, these

rules become self-reinforcing and develop perceptions of honesty and trustworthiness among the members. Kramer (1999) cites an example of the Hewlett-Packard organization allowing all engineers open access to lab materials for work in the office and also at home. This policy indicated to employees that they were considered trust worthy and that their work was valued. Tschannen-Moran (2000) cites a similar example from a school setting. In this example, a new principal wanted to combat the perception that supplies were limited when in fact more experienced teachers were hoarding supplies leaving new teachers with nothing. The principal stocked the storeroom full of supplies and told the teachers to take what they needed. Initially, the shelves again emptied quickly each time they were stocked, but eventually, the teachers learned that there was no need to stock pike and hoard supplies. They learned to trust that there was no risk in the sharing of resources. When rules and norms are established that express trust in employees, they tend to breed trust in return (Kramer, 1999; Tschannen-Moran, 2000). The quantity and nature of rules can also be an indication of negative trust levels when rules are developed as a means to control behavior (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Kramer's literature review (1999) identifies three key benefits of trust. The first benefit is that trust reduces the cost of interpersonal transactions by allowing members to assume the best of each other's actions and motivations in the absence of personalized knowledge or adequate grounds for conferring trust. Secondly, trust increases spontaneous sociability by increasing the chances that an individual will work toward collective goals, share useful information, and use responsible restraint when faced with limited shared resources. Finally, trust increases voluntary deference within hierarchical relationships such as those between teachers and administrators. Administrators (or other

managers) cannot possibly monitor and punish every example of non-compliance, nor can they recognize and reward every positive example. “As a result, efficient organizational performance depends on individuals’ feelings of obligation toward the organization, and their willingness to voluntarily defer to organizational authorities” (Kramer, 1999, p. 585). As a part of voluntary deference, trust also facilitates dispute resolution. People are more likely to accept an outcome even if they disagree with the decision if they trust the motives and intentions of the person in authority.

Kramer’s (1999) research discovered that individuals are most likely to consider authority figures trustworthy when the individuals feel that the authority recognizes their status as full members of the organization, when they believe that the leader is well intentioned and honest, and when the leader acts with fairness and impartiality. Additionally, research shows that procedures that are structurally and interactionally fair increase trust because they are examples of the leader’s competence and good intention. Finally, trust becomes more critical when organizations and individuals are faced with unfavorable outcomes. When things go well, the evidence of competence is clear. However, when things do not go well, trust inspires the participants to stay meaningfully engaged (Kramer, 1999).

Unfortunately, distrust and suspicion are common and persistent problems in many organizations. When expectations have been violated or another is judged insincere or guilty of harboring ulterior motives, suspicion arises. Once suspicion has been aroused, individuals begin trying to gather social data and draw inferences regarding the trustworthiness of others and will act with heightened awareness that there may be more to a situation than is evident on the surface. Often a specific context alone is enough to

arouse suspicion regardless of the specific individuals involved, and sometimes the mere fact of membership in the “other” group, no matter how arbitrary the designation is enough to arouse suspicion (Kramer, 1999).

There has been a steady decline of trust in public and private institutions since the mid-1960’s (Kramer, 1999; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The media’s role in framing the news in terms of winners and losers and highlighting pandering, deceit, and the positioning for advantage of public figures has helped erode the public trust in institutions because highly visible leaders become the icons for these institutions. Further, highly publicized moral failings of some key leaders erode trust not only in the individual, but also in the institution. Some cite the possibility that because government has set lofty goals, such as eradicating poverty, education for all, and protection for the environment, these things have become expectations. When these expectations fall short, trust is eroded (Kramer, 1999). Schools are entrusted with the considerable trust to care for, educate and prepare students for their role as productive future citizens. With these lofty expectations, the potential for falling short is great (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Unfortunately, the research indicates that trust eroding events carry more weight than trust building events and bearers of bad news are given more credibility than bearers of good news. Furthermore, people in lesser power situations are more attuned to trust building or trust breaking behaviors than people with more situational power (Tschannen-Moran, 2000; Kramer, 1999). For example, graduate students are more sensitive to trust building or eroding issues than professors (Kramer, 1999). Once distrust is established either by an individual’s disposition toward distrust or by trust eroding experiences, it is

difficult to overcome through trust building experiences. This is because the distrusting individual is less likely to engage in social activities that are likely to foster trust. Or worse, the distrusting individual is more likely to exhibit behavior that reinforces mistrust (Kramer, 1999).

Although difficult to repair, either party can initiate a rebuilding process. This process involves an explicit statement of desire to rebuild trust, attentive listening to the perspective of the other person, a sincere acknowledgement of responsibility for the breach of trust, and agreement about what must be done to restore trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). The offended party will then be in a position to judge the sincerity of the other individual. While there are no guarantees regarding the outcome of this process, trust will not likely be restored without directly addressing the situation (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

Trust: conditions that create it

Vangen and Huxham (2003) describe a cyclical trust building loop wherein trust is primarily built in response to a series of successful interactions. In their model, one positive result builds the level of trust for the next interaction. Tschannen-Moran (2000) asserts that when a power differential exists, it is the job of the individual with more power or the formal title to initiate and maintain the trust building process. There are two foundational steps required to get started. The first step in the process starts with a shared expectation for the future of the collaboration based on reputation, past behavior, or contracts and agreements. In the educational field, this might start with a state or district directive such as participation in professional learning communities for example. Once

the need for and the basis of the collaboration is established, a second foundational step is that the parties have *enough* trust to be willing to be vulnerable and take a risk to initiate the collaboration. Complete confidence is not required at this point. Once these foundations are in place, the cycle begins by setting a realistic aim for a successful outcome. This setting of a modest, attainable goal reinforces trusting attitudes which in turn establishes the underpinnings for more ambitious collaboration. Initiating the trust-building loop requires forming realistic common expectations and recognizing and managing the vulnerabilities of the participants. Sustaining the trust-building loop requires managing the changing dynamics of the group and managing the power imbalances (Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

Any type of collaboration can pose risks because the parties involved must make themselves vulnerable to each other in order to form a common vision and decide on a course of action. “Talking honestly with colleagues about what’s working and what’s not means exposing your own ignorance and making yourself vulnerable. Without trust, genuine conversations of this sort remain unlikely” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 41). Therefore, collaboration requires some level of initial trust. Fortunately, complete trust is not necessary to get started. By attending to the trust building loop, it is possible to start with a “small wins” approach (Kramer, 1999). In this process there does not need to be a shared vision on all possible points, but rather an agreement to move ahead on one piece of action at a time. If this initial interaction is successful, both parties will be more likely to confront larger issues the next time.

Power and control issues heavily impact trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). In some cases the power issues stem from obvious relationship

imbalances such as when one person holds a formal leadership position over another. However, other issues can be more subtle such as when one party takes credit for past accomplishments, when conflicting agendas exist, or when one or more people take control of the discourse. Furthermore, it is possible for even the *perception* of power or lack of power to become reality, because people often act as if their perceptions are real. For example, when one party arrives with prepared documentation for a meeting and the other party arrives unprepared, the prepared person can establish a power imbalance. In a positive light, it is possible for those with seemingly less power to maintain power balance by knowledge, competence, and participation in the collaboration (Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

Developing shared aims, no matter how modest can be challenging due to ambiguity in identifying the role of the individuals involved and due to the complexity of the issue to be resolved (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). In a school setting, for example a team might come together to develop a plan to improve student behavior. While this sounds like a straight forward task, simply defining the problem is likely to lead to issues of both ambiguity and complexity. In this example, without structures or protocols to guide the problem solving process, participants may get bogged down in cycle of blame and mistrust, trying to decide if the problem is that the students are undisciplined and disrespectful, if the problem is lack of parental support, if the problem is teachers who are unwilling or unable to form positive relationships with students, or if the problem is unresponsive administrators. An example of a modest aim for such a conversation might be to decide to gather some data on which students and teachers are generating the most disciplinary referrals, and where and when these incidents are occurring. If the group

reconvenes at a future date prepared with data to better define the problem, a small amount of trust is established and the conversation can continue.

All organizations change and transition continuously. This may be due to changes in personnel, changes in mandates or required aims, changes in other external conditions, or even in the fulfillment of previous aims. Continuous changes in the facets of the organization require continuous attention the trust-building loop. The key for leadership is to recognize and manage the potential risk for participants in such a way that they can move to the next level of trust. Leaders can engage in a range of trust nurturing activities and thereby positively feed the trust-building loop (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Bryk and Schneider (2003) suggest that some of these activities include acknowledging the vulnerabilities of others, actively listening, and remaining consistent in word and actions. “Particularly in a school context, it is important to understand the role played by organizational structure, policies, and culture in the development and sustenance of trust” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 580).

Youngs and King (2002) conducted a series of interviews at four elementary schools to examine the extent to which principal leadership for professional development addressed school organizational capacity. This study confirmed that principals do grow this capacity in several ways. First, they build capacity through their beliefs and actions regarding teacher professional development. Next, they create internal structures and conditions that promote professional development. In addition, they provide access to external professional development resources. Finally, they promote social trust among staff members.

Trust is built by leaders who demonstrate competence (ability), an attitude of genuine care (benevolence), honesty and follow through (integrity), openness and reliability (Tschannen-Moran, 2000). Trust reaps benefit for organizations through increased citizenship behaviors, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and job performance (Avolio, et al., 2004). Finally, where trust exists, teachers and students feel that they are successful and that their contributions are appreciated and they are better able to respond effectively to the daily challenges of life. Authentic leaders cultivate trust by finding what it is their people do well and building upon these strengths. Often in schools we operate from a deficit point of view when working with teachers and students, by focusing on what is wrong or weak. This perspective ends up cultivating more of the same (Avolio, et al., 2004). In contrast, a mindset of valuing teachers as demonstrated by authentic leadership is the foundation to building a culture in which teachers trust each other enough to engage in collaboration.

Trust: protocols that reduce risk

Designing a structure that supports professional learning conversations is unfortunately more complicated than getting people together to talk. Protocols help us format the conversations to increase productivity (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter & McDonald, 2007). Protocols provide a structure for professional learning conversations that make professional meetings less frustrating and more productive. While “just talking” can have great benefits in social situations, “in formal settings, just talking can be counterproductive” (McDonald, et al, 2007, p. 5). Few professionals have not been subjected to meetings where much talking occurred, but little was resolved or

accomplished. Often meeting leaders talk too much or allow others to talk too much. “Together the talkers choke off real listening” (p. 6). When a leader develops a consensus of norms for participation including structures that ensure equity of participation and expression, personal risk and vulnerability is reduced. Establishing a purpose for gathering, establishing effective ground rules for interactions, applying those rules consistently, enabling colleagues to share information openly, attending to one another’s perspective, and a collective commitment to the choices of the group, make the time spent in collaboration far more effective. In an educational setting, key elements of a professional community of practice are: a focus on student learning; a sharing of practice; collaboration; common norms and values; and reflective dialogue. However, in many schools administrators require that teachers work on teams or meet in professional learning communities but provide no models for making the time productive.

Protocols as learning formats rely on a designated facilitator to guide the process. The job of the facilitator is to promote participation, ensure equity, and build trust. Therefore, the facilitator may be any member of the group (not necessarily the recognized leader). In fact, the organization will become stronger as more people are cultivated to serve in this role (McDonald, et al, 2007). In the process, the facilitator must decide which protocol to use, how to open, and how to close the meeting, and potentially how to intervene if something goes wrong. Although there are a variety of potential opening protocols which vary in length from very brief (introductions, context review, and norm-setting) to more complex activities, some form of opening must occur. The facilitator may be tempted to jump right in and “skip all that touchy-feely stuff” (McDonald, et al, 2007, p. 18), but to do so may jeopardize the success of the discussion. While protocols

do help prevent conversations from going wrong, unexpected things still do occur. When this happens the facilitator will need to intervene to redirect. Usually this will be a matter of restating the norms for the protocol. This timely intervention reinforces a structure that builds trust among the participants. The closing should be brief, but is as necessary as an appropriate opening. An example of a brief closing protocol would be to ask the participants to answer three short questions regarding the meeting content: “What” (what have I learned about this topic)?, “So what” (what difference does it make)?, and “Now what” (how do I make the most of what I have learned)? (McDonald, et al, 2007).

While the structure of protocols may seem artificial at the outset, they provide a framework to increase the productivity of professional learning conversations. Furthermore, when these conversations are productive and meaningful to the participants the perception that some may have of time spent talking to colleagues as wasted will diminish. The National School Reform Faculty website at www.nsrffharmony.org provides many protocols which can be used in a variety of settings for a variety of purposes. The discussion below highlights three specific examples of protocols that can be implemented for three very different purposes. Feedback loops provide an informal structure for an administrative team to introduce new ideas to staff in a face to face discussion, and then gauge the reaction, resistance, or feedback to the idea. Appreciative Inquiry is a protocol to be used in a large group setting to identify the successes of an organization with the purposes of studying and extending what has previously worked. Finally, peer coaching, is a protocol that breaks down the norm of teacher isolation by inviting teachers to visit each other’s classrooms and initiating a dialogue on professional practice.

Feedback loops

Lambert (1998) believes that one of the missing pieces from communication within schools is a system for disseminating and gathering information on key issues that impact the whole school. Neither whole faculty announcements nor written communication provides the small group interaction necessary to include all members in the thinking. She suggests a strategy called “feedback loops.” In this process each of the leadership team members becomes responsible for a group of six to eight faculty members. The leadership team members initiate on-going conversations that occur over the space of a week or so. These small conversations give the leadership team insight into the thoughts and feelings of the faculty and allow faculty members time to think, ask questions and process new information. Feedback loops weave together the thinking and engagement of the staff. They are also a process by which to share the power of knowledge. When individual staff members have an opportunity to express their questions, concerns and ideas, and they realize that their input is valued, it is less likely that the staff will become segmented and isolated.

The Appreciative Inquiry protocol

The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) protocol starts with a question designed to elicit memories of a time in the participants experience when the individual felt particularly effective and fulfilled in his or her job. Author and organizational development consultant, Bea Mah Holland, opened an AI session with school district officials and school administrators from the Lexington, Massachusetts district with this question, “As you reflect back on your years in schools, what is one time when you felt most engaged,

alive, committed and proficient, and when important results were achieved? What was it about you – your unique qualities and skills – that made that experience successful?” (Markova & Holland, 2005, p. 1). There are four phases to the AI protocol, discovery, dream, destiny and design. The diagram in Figure 2 depicts how these phases work together (adapted from Whitney, 1998 and Randolph, 2006).

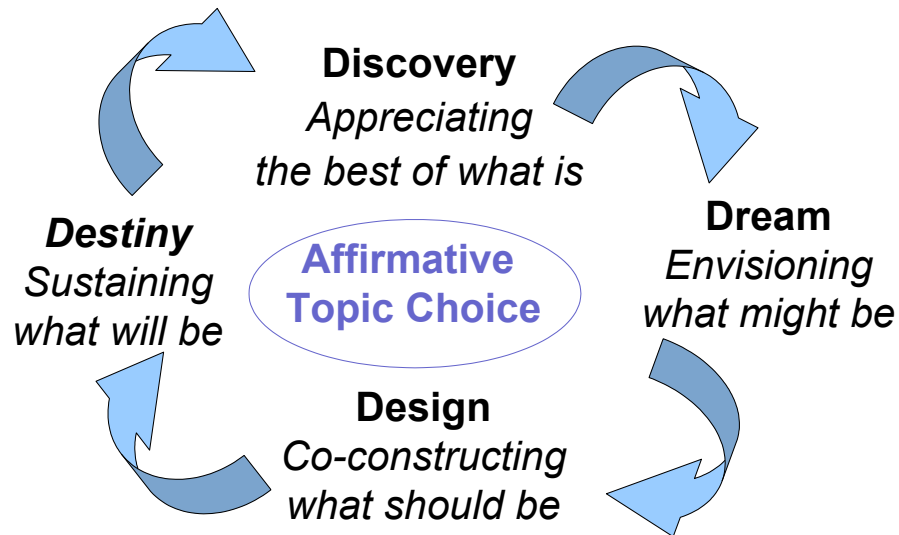


Figure 2: The Four Phases of the AI Process

The process of leading the group through each of these phases is similar for each phase. The discussion starts in pairs. Then the pairs join a small group. The small group records common themes on chart paper and then shares with the whole group (Christie, 2006). However, there are variations. One large AI project was conducted in a nationwide network of 370 volunteer centers in 49 states. This organization used AI to complete a strategic planning process. Many in the organization suggested that it would be easier to have a small group of executives in one location complete the plan. However, if that had occurred, that small group of executives would have been the only people to know about

or value the plan. As a result of the process used, “the organization moved to a place of doing things *with* the volunteer network, versus doing this *to* them, or *for* them” (Randolph, 2006, p. 1087). Following the strategy known in educational circles as “Think-Pair-Share,” with participants talking first in pairs, then in groups and then as a community, allows thoughts and ideas to come forward from individuals who might never at first share in a larger group setting. The format builds in emotional safety structures to facilitate a more open exchange of ideas (Christie, 2006). The AI protocol stems from eight basic assumptions:

1. In every society, organization, or group, something works
2. What we focus on becomes our reality
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities
4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be the best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality. (Yoder, 2005; Randolph 2006)

Researchers Egan and Lancaster (2002) conducted a study of organizations that had used the AI approach. They sought to understand what participants believed to be the strengths and weaknesses of the process. Identified strengths included the opportunity to consider new possibilities for the organization, connecting members with the positive from the organization’s past, and refining understanding about organizational capacity.

Of course, when it comes to social discourse and interpersonal relationships there are bound to be some pitfalls, and AI is not a magic wand to solve all problems. The participants in this study also shared areas of weakness of the AI approach such as the fact that difficult interpersonal situations may be overlooked, feelings of anger or frustration may not be voiced, and dissatisfied organization members might retreat and withdraw. When discussing the weaknesses of AI, the results of the study indicate that it is critical not to overlook the pre-existing negative interpersonal situations that could sabotage the process. To work more effectively with the AI process, the researchers concluded, “We must continue to pay attention to the more subtle interactions between organization members, so that we can better understand how the focus on positive imagery and communication is or is not transferred” (Egan & Lancaster, 2002, p. 24). Diana Whitney, of Whitney Consulting in Taos, New Mexico, co-authored articles with AI founder, Dr. Cooperrider, and has led many organizations through the AI process. Whitney explains:

To change an organization is to change the nature and quality of participation and interaction among the many organization stakeholders. It is to change who talks to whom about what (Whitney, 1998, p. 314).

The AI process has been used in large corporations (Whitney, 1998), urban renewal projects, educational reform projects (Markova & Holland, 2005), by business management professors with students (Yballe & O’Connor, 2000), and with alternative high school students (DeLaOssa, 2005). In February of 2010, the Pinellas County School District used the Appreciative Inquiry process under the guidance of St. Petersburg College Collaborative Labs to form goals for the *Race To The Top* federal grant funding

application. The process allowed hundreds of district administrators, principals, assistant principals and teachers to participate in the goal development process. The AI protocol is a tool that can be used to facilitate vision setting, program evaluation and improvement action planning processes. Furthermore, the principles of AI can inform every aspect of our work with teachers and students, and the protocol of AI can help structure productive professional learning conversations.

Peer coaching protocols

Peer coaching models are another form of protocol for structuring professional learning conversations. There are a variety of models from which to choose, allowing schools to custom fit the protocol to meet the needs of their particular setting. One model follows a traditional pre-conference, observation and post-conference format. This format requires extensive training, particularly to learn how to provide appropriate follow-up feedback (Robbins, 1991). A second model reverses the traditional format of the observer as coach to the observed as coach. In this model there is no formal feedback provided. The primary learning comes from peer coaching study teams planning and developing curriculum and instruction (Showers & Joyce, 1996). In a third model participating teachers stop into each other's rooms as is convenient, stay for 15 minutes or so, and then leave a brief note on a carbonless two-part form. The note includes two compliments and two suggestions. Only the two teachers involved see what is written. The participants each keep a copy of the forms they have written and those they have received. At the end of the process, they review what has been said and write a reflection. This reflection can be shared if the author desires (Allen & LeBlanc, 2005). All of these models are based

on voluntary participation and can function outside of or along side of the formal teacher evaluation process. Teachers are more likely to participate in a meaningful way when they can trust that they control their own level of risk and commitment (Allen & LeBlanc, 2005).

These models of peer coaching help to break down the norm of isolation in part by providing a structure to help manage the risk involved with inviting other teachers into the classroom. With historical roots in the one-room schoolhouse, another teacher's classroom is considered to be a private domain. In most situations there is no precedent for entering another teacher's classroom and certainly no precedent to make any comment on what one observed there if such a visit did occur. This norm of isolation differs from other professions such as law and medicine where working together to solve problems and expand knowledge is accepted practice. In fact, within education, that many teachers may have entered the profession precisely because of the autonomous nature of the work (Robbins, 1991). Yet, "teacher isolation is an important factor in producing teacher uncertainty and, by extension, undermining student achievement" (Allen & LeBlanc, 2005, p. 25).

Showers and Joyce (1996) have been studying and writing about peer coaching since 1980. Their interest in peer coaching grew out of the realization that only about 10 percent of professional development activities transfer into changed practice in the classroom. Initially the assumption was that this lack of implementation resulted from flaws in the teacher's motivation and effort, however, further investigation into how people learn new behaviors led them to believe that modeling and coaching from a master teacher within the context of the classroom would increase implementation. At first,

Showers and Joyce believed that the coach needed to be a content expert, but over time they learned that peers who had received the same training could observe each other and talk about what they had learned if they had follow-up training. They also learned that when schools organized structures that allowed teachers the opportunity to work together in this fashion the odds of effective implementation (positive impact on students) were virtually reversed from traditional training only models.

Arnau, Kahrs, and Kruskamp (2004) describe a peer coaching program that was implemented at a large high school in Georgia. The researchers examined the perspectives of 14 veteran high school teachers to determine why they chose to participate and what they got out of it. The study revealed five themes related to motivation and five themes related to the meaning the teachers derived from the process. Motivational themes included, a desire to learn, the voluntary nature of the program, a need for meaningful feedback, the flexibility of the program (choices), and dissatisfaction with traditional observations. From their participation the teachers gained the meaningful feedback they had desired, self-directed learning, trust and increased respect among the peer coaches, and a discovery that the process was valuable despite the extra work involved. The meaningful feedback, the affirmation of their skills, and the trust exhibited by administrators when the teachers took control of their learning all increased the teachers' motivation to participate. From this program and a subsequent study, the researchers concluded that if administrators want teachers to participate in professional development activities and to implement what they learn, they will need to provide differentiated opportunities based on the teachers' motivations. Also, based on the

experience at this school, to implement a peer coaching program a principal must be willing to become more facilitative and less directive.

Zwart, Wubbels, Bolhuis and Bergen (2008) also describe a study of teacher learning through reciprocal peer coaching. Eight high school teachers from four schools worked together as peer coaches over the course of a year. They discovered one powerful teacher learning outcome of peer coaching is that when teachers know that they are going to be observed by a peer, they will be more likely to try a new idea. This may be because the teacher wants to impress the colleague by using more up to date strategies (a form of peer pressure) or because he or she sincerely sees an opportunity to receive feedback from the colleague on the new idea. Also, consistent with Showers and Joyce's (1996) findings, participants most often reported learning activities occurring outside the classroom rather than while observing or being observed. Changed ideas occurred most often during interaction with a coaching partner. In these interactions teachers asked for and received advice and feedback. They reported gaining in confidence in the use of strategies and specific materials and reported an increased sense of belonging. Learning activity was least reported during an actual teaching situation. In addition, while teachers reported learning from their peer coaching partner during a coaching conference, they rarely mentioned learning from their peer coach while observing their partner teach. Instead, they reported that while they were observing, they were more concerned with preparing comments or suggestions about the colleague's lesson.

Like other researchers who espouse peer coaching, Allen and LeBlanc (2005) believe that schools are structured in ways that isolate teachers, pay little attention to their professional development, provide (even mandate) ineffective professional development,

and provide little performance feedback beyond mandatory evaluations which are often completed hastily after one brief classroom observation. This fractured structure can prevent even knowledgeable and motivated teachers from experiencing joy in their work. The authors connect this loss of joy and the negative emotion that comes from the stress many teachers feel as a detriment to brain chemistry, immune systems, and the ability to learn.

Protocols in their various forms, when used intentionally to provide structured professional conversations help reduce the personal and professional risks that are inherent in social interactions. If educators are to learn and grow in order to increase teaching capacity, they must have time, space and structure that will facilitate professional learning conversations.

Concluding Comments

Accepting the concept of professional learning conversation as an avenue to building teaching capacity requires a mindset that accepts Douglas R. McGregor's *Theory Y* assumptions regarding the human characteristics of talent, willingness to accept responsibility, creativity, and capacity for personal growth. While McGregor first articulated his Theory X and Theory Y framework almost fifty years ago, many managers today when faced with performance pressures and low employee morale resort to reward and incentive programs that fall back on the "stick" when the "carrot" fails (Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004). In the field of education, the age of accountability and the heavy handed potential sanctions of NCLB and Differentiated Accountability increase the temptation to focus on people's weaknesses and ways to fix them. For this reason, a

significant mental shift may be required on the part of educational leaders to move away from negative assumptions of human behavior toward positive organizational behaviors of confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience (Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004). Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003) articulate a way to classify the magnitude or “order” of change. First order changes happen within existing paradigms and can be implemented with existing knowledge and skills. Second order changes occur outside of existing paradigms and require new knowledge and skills to implement. For many school and district leaders, changing organizational structures to support professional learning conversations on the faith that teaching capacity will be increased will require a second order change. However, it is clear that the current patterns of isolation among both teachers and administrators found in so many schools are not building teaching capacity needed.

The literature reviewed in this document strongly supports the idea that if we are to build the teaching and learning capacity in schools, the leadership for improvement must be distributed throughout the staff in a planned alignment. In this system, teachers become leaders. Based on a social constructivist framework for learning, teachers must have both the time and the appropriate protocols to develop a culture of collaboration. Further, trust is the primary lubricant that enables this collaboration and transformative learning. Given the clarity of the research on the power of professional learning conversations to promote professional growth, solidify improved implementation of new instructional practices, and unleash creativity, ending the routine practice of teacher isolation in schools becomes an imperative.

Although there are many conflicting demands placed upon school-based administrators from forces outside of their control, within their locus of control much can be done to support professional learning conversations. In large schools, it is often the assistant principals who interact most frequently with teachers, who do teacher evaluations, design the master schedules, and conduct team meetings. Therefore, it may be the assistant principals who need an opportunity to increase their understanding of their opportunity to influence teacher growth. The purpose of this review has been to examine the literature related to how trust impacts professional learning conversations. The findings informed a study that sought to explore the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, and social structures processes related to professional learning conversations from the perspective of a select group of assistant principals.

Chapter III

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to discover, document, and describe the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, social structures and processes related to professional learning conversations from the perspective of a select group of assistant principals. This descriptive, qualitative study used a modified critical incident technique through participant written response (Flanagan, 1954; Tripp, 1993; Woolsey, 1986) and two in depth interviews with each respondent (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Johnson, 2002), to investigate the lived experiences of these assistant principals related to the practice of professional learning conversations in their schools.

The Qualitative Interview

The qualitative interview is a format that allows the researcher to gather information not available through other means of research. The in-depth interview is used when the researcher is seeking deeper information than can be found in surveys and informal interviewing. In such cases, structured survey questions would not lead to the potential richness of understanding that can flow from open-ended response questions with flexibility of design. The exploratory nature of the qualitative interview allows the researcher to pursue interesting aspects of the individual responses in greater depth (Kvale, 1996; Tierney & Dilley, 2002; Warren, 2002). “This information usually concerns very personal matters such as the individual’s self, lived experience, values and

decisions, occupational ideology, cultural knowledge or perspective” (Johnson, 2002, p. 104). In the field of educational leadership, researchers are less interested in documenting how leaders define the attributes of a leader, and more interested in the “ordinary cognitive processes involved – in particular, how the interviewee utilizes varied frameworks of knowledge and language to make sense of, and to account for, his or her world and experience” (Tierney & Dilley, 2002, p. 460).

Conducting a successful qualitative interview study requires negotiating a research relationship between the researcher and the participants. The researcher is the data collection instrument and the relationship established with the participants is the key to success in fully gleaning meaningful insight (Kvale, 1996; Warren, 2002). While many times the respondents and the researcher are strangers, many times this is not the case (Warren, 2002).

In-depth, one on one, interactions involves the kind of intimacy that arises from mutual disclosure. The relationship resembles a friendship but goes beyond friendship because the interviewer will use the information for some other purpose (Johnson, 2002). In this process the researcher offers some form of reciprocity whether by sharing the interviewer’s views and reflections on the topic or by offering information such as what others are doing or advice. In this way the interviewer and interviewee become collaborative partners (Johnson, 2002). The researcher’s view of the subject may change and develop as the interviews progress because of this collaboration (Kvale, 1996). The process of participating in an educational research interview has the potential to empower the participant to consider new ideas and potentially change his or her personal situation (Tierney & Dilley, 2002). Interviews oriented to educational reform, “can serve a

pedagogical function for the interviewed as well as for the interviewer...the interview itself becomes a tool of educational reform” (Tierney & Dilley, 2002, p. 457).

The interviewer’s experience and prior knowledge of the phenomenon play a key role in the usefulness of the data. If the researcher knows nothing, the role of the participant becomes that of a teacher and the potential for fuller understanding is limited. The researcher must engage in high levels of self-reflection in order to understand her personal impact on the interaction. In-depth interviewing involves a “greater involvement of the interviewer’s self” (Johnson, 2002, p. 109) than is typical in other research methodology. Individuals who are not familiar with the context will have difficulty in perceiving the nuances critical to a deeper understanding. Yet, the risk of familiarity is a fixed mindset toward the phenomena. While the interview is constructed around specific themes, it is the job of the researcher to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say, looking at both the factual and the meaning level (Kvale, 1996). The interviewer is listening “for a conceptual analysis of the person’s concept of a topic” (Kvale, 1996, p. 129). The fact that informants differ widely in their intelligence, knowledge, and ability to reflect is not a problem in that the point of the in-depth interview is not to compare or tally responses (Johnson, 2002).

Interview research may be used to learn about one person or several people’s perspectives on the phenomena (Kvale, 1996). For this reason, there is no set procedure for using the interview method, “the varieties of research interviews approach the spectrum of human conversations” (Kvale, 1996, p. 13). While a quantitative study may contain a huge number of single observations, a qualitative study may also focus on single cases (Kvale, 1996). There is no set answer to the question of how many

participants or interviews are enough. The answer depends on the type of information desired (Johnson, 2002). Kvale (1996) suggests that there is a tendency to conduct more interviews than time allows for appropriate analysis. This tendency may be a defensive reaction to what he calls a “quantitative presupposition – the more interviews, the more scientific” (p. 103). Kvale suggests a focus on quality over quantity.

The qualitative interview methodology is particularly suited to constructivist learning theory that also supports the need for professional learning conversations. Qualitative interviews framed as social interactions are more than just talking and listening. *Who* the participants are and who the researcher is becomes a part of the meaning making process and provides insight into the social contexts of learning (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Tierney & Dilley, 2002; Warren, 2002). The object of the qualitative interview is to discern meaningful and nuanced patterns within the participant’s descriptions of his or her lived experience (Kvale, 1996; Warren, 2002).

Critical Incident Technique

“The qualitative research interview seeks to describe specific situations and action sequences from the subject’s world...not general opinions” (Kvale, 1996, p. 33). The critical incident technique is useful in moving a qualitative research interview beyond the world of general opinion by asking the respondent to describe a specific event which can then be examined for significance and implications. The critical incident technique is a strategy used to “collect observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems” (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327). Flanagan (1954) developed the technique in his work with the Aviation Psychology

Program of the United States Army Air Forces during World War II. Since that time, the critical incident technique has been used in a variety of research settings in the military, education, human resource development, nursing, and counseling. (Flanagan, 1954; Preskill, 1996; Tripp, 1993; Woolsey, 1986). Although there is great flexibility and variety in the application of the purpose and process, the common thread is that participants are invited to share either in writing and/or in an interview, the details of a specific event which they observed or experienced. In most cases these events will not have seemed “critical” at the time they occurred, but rather fairly typical. Flanagan (1954) defines an incident as “any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act” (p. 327). What will make an ordinary event turn into a critical incident is the process of reflecting on what occurred, what happened as a result, and the implications of the decisions and choices that were made in the process. (Preskill, 1996; Tripp, 1993; Woolsey, 1986). Critical incidents are created by the process of describing and reflecting upon a specific event. “Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event” (Tripp, 1993, p. 8).

As a subset of the qualitative interview, the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) is a process in which the participant describes a specific event related to the topic to be studied. The event itself will in most cases not have appeared “critical” at the time it occurred, but becomes critical through the reflection process (Tripp, 1993). The critical incident technique moves the interview conversation from generalities and hypothetical situations into specifics and real events. By reflecting upon the incident described,

significance and implications can be applied to help solve practical problems (Flanagan, 1954).

This study will use the critical incident technique followed by in depth qualitative interviews. The participants will be asked in advance to write about a recent professional learning conversation between teachers that they facilitated or in which they participated. The purpose of the written description of a specific event (critical incident), is to frame the subsequent interviews in a concrete occurrence. The critical incident becomes a reflective lens through which to reflect upon attitudes and beliefs (Flanagan, 1954; Tripp, 1993; Woolsey, 1986). This methodology is particularly well suited to a study of assistant principals' perceptions on professional learning conversations in that the social interactions of the interview conversations are likely to become reflective learning incidents for both the participant and the researcher.

Participants

The participants in this study were nine assistant principals who had at least three years administrative experience. Three were elementary, three were middle, and three were high school APs. All were enrolled or had completed the district's principal certification program, called "Level 2." Level 2 was a two-year process designed to document competency of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards and leads to School Principal certification. The district expectation was that all teachers were involved in professional learning conversations. For this reason, the study and implementation of professional learning communities and effective protocols for structuring professional

learning conversations are a key focus of the professional development the participants receive in this program.

The district's three associate superintendents were asked to identify five schools each that they considered to be "collaborative." The associate superintendents directly supervised the principals and schools assigned to them which means they regularly visited each school campus. This practice gave them first hand knowledge of the culture of the campus. By identifying experienced assistant principals from collaborative schools who have had training in professional learning communities, the researcher hoped to have the opportunity to talk to individuals with significant experiences related to professional learning conversations. However, to reach the goal of three APs at each level who were willing to participate and could meet the time constraints of the study, the researcher was required to expand the search to invite other experienced APs. The goal in identifying three APs at each level was to discover whether or not there would be patterns across the levels. Typically secondary schools have more difficulty in implementing professional learning conversations due to the norm of teacher isolation. Traditionally, in most secondary schools, there is no precedent or structure in place to support teachers talking together about their work or visiting one another's classrooms. (Allen & LeBlanc, 2005; Robbins, 1991).

Johnson (2002) states that "the best informants are those who have been thoroughly acculturated in the setting or community, have recent membership participation, have some provisional interest in assisting the interviewer, and have adequate time and resources to take part in the interviews." This group was chosen because based on their experiences as active school administrators, and the district and

state expectations of professional learning communities, they were expected to be acculturated in the concept of professional learning conversations. They were also expected to be able to express first hand the successes and challenges they have faced.

Assistant principals, rather than principals or teachers, were chosen as the focus of this study because of the direct role they play in the day to day lives of teachers and students. Assistant principals usually do teacher evaluations and design the master schedule. Often they have an opportunity to influence the nature of the professional development provided for teachers. Furthermore, assistant principals are a unique group less studied than principals, teachers or students (Glanz, 2004; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Weller & Weller, 2002).

This study used a purposeful sampling based on convenience. These nine APs were selected based upon their willingness to participate and based on the potential of the critical incident they shared to provide rich data for the study. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) argue that if possible, respondents should be chosen because they are assumed to have the potential for “narrative production” on the topic. Maxwell (2005) suggests that purposeful sampling in qualitative studies can help achieve representativeness by selecting for typicality and relative homogeneity so that the conclusions adequately represent the average members of the population. This guidance helped shape the criteria set for participant selection for this study.

Identifying Participants

The researcher contacted each of the district’s three associate superintendents to request that each provide the names of five schools they considered to be collaborative.

Then the researcher identified APs at each of these schools that had at least three years of experience. Additional experienced APs from schools not identified by the associate superintendents were invited to reach the goal of a total of nine candidates. A total 18 individuals were invited. The individuals received an email invitation (see Appendix A) with a follow up phone call request for participation. The purpose of the study was explained and details were provided regarding the level of commitment that would be involved.

The estimated time commitment was approximately three hours over the course of the summer of 2010 and involved:

1. A written response to several questions (creating the critical incident). The estimated time for this was 30 to 60 minutes depending upon the individual's length of response.
2. Two one-hour interviews approximately one month apart.
3. Time as desired to review the interview transcript after each interview and provide further clarification or response.

At the time of the first interview, each participant was given a copy of the Informed Consent to Participate in Research. The researcher requested and received a waiver of Informed Consent from the Institutional Review Board. This waiver was requested to ensure anonymity for the participants. Therefore, participants were not asked to sign the Informed Consent. However, their copy of the form provided a brief overview of the purpose and procedures of the study, explained what would be involved if the individual agreed to participate, and committed the researcher to strict confidentiality (see Appendix B). The Informed Consent document to be provided to the participants for this study was

formatted according to the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board template.

Data Collection Process

The in-depth interview begins slowly with a simple set of planned questions designed to break the ice and build trust and rapport. These opening questions are followed by transition questions that include the purpose of the study, permission to use the tape recorder, etc. Then there are five to eight questions that get to the heart of the study. Finally, the interview ends with a summary of what the interviewer has heard or what others have said (Johnson, 2002). Although the research literature related to the topic will help form the research questions and the design of the study, the interviewer must remain flexible as the interview unfolds to understand the perspective of the participant and adjust the questions as needed. While the interviewer will use main questions to guide the conversation, probing questions to clarify answers or request further examples, and follow up questions that pursue implications of answers to the main questions, the exact questions may vary as the conversation continues (Warren, 2002).

The interviewer should review notes and transcripts as the interviews proceed and progressively focus the questioning and probing throughout the conversation. Later interviews involve more specific probes and verification. If the informant goes off track, the interviewer records these moves to analyze how these interviewing actions impacted the information received. Responses can be verified and clarified at a subsequent interview (Johnson, 2002).

Rubin and Rubin (2005) define good answers as those that provide depth of detail, vividness, and nuance (p. 129), however during the interview itself, it is difficult to appreciate the depth or what the interviewee is offering. The transcripts and reviewing of the audio give the researcher an opportunity to listen for the meaning of what was said. For this reason, it is critical to have verbatim transcripts in order to help filter out the researcher's human response of factoring in what was heard, perceived, witnessed, and prior assumptions. Field notes are critical for further description of the setting, but cannot replace transcripts for accuracy (Johnson, 2002). However, the researcher should be aware that recording interviews may have an impact on the types of information that will be shared. It is not uncommon with qualitative interviewing that interviewees will share "off the record" information when the recorder is turned off. Scheduling interviews at times and places convenient to the respondents to increases the likelihood of follow through. When conducting qualitative interviews the location/context of the interview becomes part of the meaning making process (Warren, 2002). The interviews for this study were conducted at locations suggested by the participants. Five requested that the researcher meet with them at their school sites in their offices. Four of the participants chose public establishments such as coffee shops or restaurants convenient to their home or school locations. All interviews took place during non-student contact hours given the timing of the study during the summer months.

The written critical incident

The study included collecting data surrounding specific facets of a critical incident described in writing by each of the assistant principals. The purpose of the

written critical incident was to encourage the participants to describe a specific professional learning conversation upon which to anchor the subsequent interviews. Prior to the first set of interviews, participants were asked to provide a written description of a recent teacher professional learning conversation that they facilitated or in which they participated which was particularly effective or ineffective. They were provided a series of questions, which lead them through the creation of their written critical incident (see Appendix C). A key function of the critical incident technique was to discover how each participant defines the topic to be studied, in this case, professional learning conversations. The process might have revealed a wide variety of definitions or might have revealed uniform perspectives. In any case, because the purpose was to discover these assistant principals' perspectives, the only non-informative response would have been no response.

Each written description was analyzed for the clarity provided by the participant. The researcher looked for full descriptions of the structure of the incident including the setting, the duration, the topic, the data sources used, and the participants' role in initiating and facilitating the conversation. In addition, the researcher looked for the participants' awareness of the impact on and evidence of teacher growth as well as elements of trust or mistrust displayed. It was accurately anticipated that the written description would not provide the full detail needed to understand the assistant principal's perspectives. However, this written statement became the critical incident that was the focus of the subsequent interviews.

The first interview

The first interview was designed to clarify and further describe the written critical incident. For this reason, the questions for the first set of interviews closely followed the questions asked in the written critical incident, but were modified as needed for each participant in order to gain a complete understanding of the context and structure of the specific incident they described (see Appendix D). The purpose of going into the first interview with a written reflection describing a specific event was to ground the conversation in something that actually occurred and to stimulate the respondent's thinking regarding the meaning of the event. Part of the protocol asked the respondent to identify evidence of trust or mistrust and of professional growth or improved classroom instruction. It was anticipated to be possible that when the participants were first asked to write about evidence of teacher growth or elements of trust or mistrust, they would possibly struggle for a response if they had not previously thought about the event in this light. However, in the time interval between the written response and the interview, because the question was posed and some written response was given, the researcher believed that the participant would be more likely to give a more detailed and thoughtful response during the interview. The purpose of the first interview was to document as thoroughly as possible both the facts and nuances of the event described.

The second interview

While the researcher approached the interview with a set of main questions, where the interview went from there was based on what was said. The researcher asked probing questions to help focus and manage the conversation, but could not predict what

the interviewee would say. After the first interview, the researcher reviewed the transcripts in order to identify important themes and concepts that required follow up questioning and for the thoroughness of the responses. Some examples of lack of thoroughness include: partial narratives; ambivalence; terms mentioned, but not defined; concepts implied, but not stated, etc. (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). “The researcher creates future questions based on what he or she has already heard ” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 35).

Appendix E provided a structure for the second interview questions. The questions varied to some degree based on each participant’s initial responses (Janesick, 2004; Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The goal of the second interview was to gain a clearer picture of the assistant principal’s self-efficacy to initiate or facilitate learning conversations and to manage the trust building process.

When conducting the interviews it was necessary to carefully plan the entire data collection process while remaining flexible to “go with the flow” of the conversation. Too rigid a structure might have precluded receiving valuable information, yet too little structure may have resulted in data that lacks usable focus (Kvale, 1996; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Warren, 2002). The goal of this data collection process was to anchor the interviews in a specific event that allowed a gradually deeper reflection both for the participant and the researcher upon what the event revealed about the perspectives, beliefs and attitudes of these assistant principals regarding professional learning conversations (Flanagan, 1954; Johnson, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Tripp, 1993; Woolsey, 1986).

Method of Data Analysis

Kvale (1996) discusses the dilemma that many qualitative researchers face once they have completed their interviews and are then faced with a mountain of transcripts. A common question is “How shall I find a method to analyze the 1,000 pages of interview transcripts I have collected?” (p. 176) The answer to this question is deceptively simple – don’t wait until you have 1,000 pages of interview transcripts before you begin analysis. By “front-loading” the analysis process, in other words, by doing the hard work of thinking through how the data will be collected and analyzed before the study begins, the analysis can take place simultaneously with the interviews (Johnson, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Maxwell, 2005; Warren, 2002). This simultaneous data collection and analysis, pursuit of emergent themes, discovery of social processes within the data, inductive construction of abstract categories, and finally the “integration of categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions and consequences of the studied process” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 677) is consistent with grounded theory analysis.

Maxwell suggests three broad categories for sorting data: organizational, substantive and theoretical. The organizational sorting is by topic and forms virtual storage bins for future retrieval. Substantive sorting is descriptive of concepts and beliefs that are usually inductively developed. Theoretical sorting is achieved according to a prior determined theory or by an inductively developed theory. Many new researchers have difficulty moving past the organizational level of coding. When this happens substantive and theoretical concepts are never fully developed. The categorizing is one type of analysis process, which breaks the data into distinct parts. Another type of analysis process, connecting strategies, looks for relationships among the different

elements. Profiles and vignettes, and discourse and narratives analysis are examples of connecting strategies. Categorization looks for similarities amid the parts, while connecting strategies look for connections with context (Maxwell, 2005). Bogdan and Biklen (1982) identify a variety of potential category distinctions as, setting/context codes, definition of the situation codes, perspectives held by subjects, subjects' ways of thinking about people and objects, process codes, activity codes, strategy codes, relationship and social structure codes, methods codes. Ultimately, the researcher will look for ways to reduce the data and limit the number of codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain a continuum of analysis strategies ranging from a quasi-statistical analytic style to an emergent intuitive style. In the first, the categories for analysis are predetermined from the start, and as the name suggests, in the latter, the categories emerge through the researcher's intuitive and interpretive capacities after all of the data has been collected. In the middle ground there is template analysis where the researcher begins with predetermined categories which can later be revised, and the editing analysis style where the researcher does not start with a template, but searches "for segments of text to generate and illustrate categories of meaning" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 155). This is the closest to a grounded theory approach to data analysis. "A grounded theory interview can be viewed as an unfolding story. It is emergent although studied and shaped. It is open-ended but framed and focused. It is intense in content yet informal in execution – conversational in style but not casual in meaning" (Charmaz, 2002).

Hatch (2002) describes a typological analysis that uses predetermined categories for data analysis. Typological analysis works well with interview studies that follow a

uniform interview protocol and yield a data set that is fairly well structured around the identified topic (Hatch, 2002). In that the interview questions are organized to glean specific information, the typologies emerge from the research questions and interview protocol. In this study, the four research questions formed the typology for data analysis.

The identified typologies were:

- Attitudes and beliefs about professional learning conversations for teacher growth
- Perceptions of the AP role in initiating or facilitating professional learning conversations
- Elements of trust related to professional learning conversations
- Perceptions of the AP role in building trust or mistrust

In this study, data analysis began as the researcher read and reflected upon the written critical incidents and continued after each interview in order to focus upon both the individual participants' responses and to include analysis across participant responses (Hatch, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). In addition to the text created by the written critical incident, both interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcription began after the first interview and was completed as quickly as possible after each subsequent interview. The researcher transcribed the first set of interviews using this process of carefully interacting with each word of the interview as part of the data analysis process. A hired transcriptionist transcribed the second set of interviews. However, the researcher reviewed each recording, carefully comparing it to the text, thus allowing a similar word-by-word analysis. Using an editing analysis style of data categorization, the researcher looked “for segments of text to generate and illustrate

categories of meaning” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 155). In this process, the researcher looked for examples of text that provided insight into the assistant principals’ experience and perspectives that were categorized as patterns emerged. A data analysis matrix (see Tables 2 through 5) was developed to provide a visual representation of the participant responses within each typology. The interview questions shaped the format for analyzing and reporting the interview data (see Appendix D and E).

Once themes were identified within each typology, the researcher selected representative statements and salient quotes from the transcripts to give a sense of how what was learned played out in the real conversations (Hatch, 2002). Kvale (1996) cautions against allowing the living conversations to “disappear into endless transcripts only to reappear butchered into fragmented quotes” (p. 182). The researcher must present the data from the transcripts as a “continuation of the conversation that started in the interview situation” (p. 184).

Validity and Reliability

Two potential threats to validity are researcher bias and reactivity. In order to guard against researcher bias or misinterpretation, the researcher conducted member checks by sharing the transcribed data from each interview with the participants and asking for confirmation of the accuracy or providing an opportunity for clarification or correction of the transcription (Maxwell, 2005). In addition, participants were encouraged to contact the researcher via email or cell phone with any subsequent thoughts or additional ideas that may be generated in retrospect. The validity threat of reactivity can only be addressed by the researcher being aware of how he or she might impact the

information received (Maxwell 2005). How a question is framed will impact the response that is obtained. The researcher was mindful and sensitive to this phenomenon while analyzing the data.

The accuracy of the data was maintained through the recording and transcription process (Johnson, 2002; Maxwell, 2005; Warren, 2002). The process of examining the text for emerging themes began with the written critical incidents and continued after each interview. This ongoing analysis allowed theoretical sensitivity by allowing the researcher to progressively focus the interviews (Johnson, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Maxwell, 2005; Warren, 2002). As the researcher began to draw conclusions regarding the data results, care was taken to consider alternative points of view, thus attempting to avoid the validity threat of theory (Maxwell, 2005).

The concept of validity addresses the question, “how might I be wrong.” In any type of research it is difficult, if not impossible to create an observer-independent by which to compare our conclusions. However, it is critical that the researcher examine alternative explanations or rival hypotheses. Within research design validity threats must be addressed by specifically identifying particular plausible alternatives to the researcher’s interpretations and explanations, and by describing how the chosen approach will adequately deal with those threats (Maxwell, 2005).

Two specific threats to validity are bias and reactivity. The researcher cannot eliminate researcher bias, but should explain possible biases and how she will deal with them. Reactivity is the influence of the researcher on the context of the observations. This cannot be eliminated either. In addition, the potential threat of reactivity is stronger in interviews than in observations, since how the participant responds is always related to

what the interview asks (and how). The only way to address this threat to validity is in the same way as with bias – by being aware of and exposing what the interviewer’s impact might be (Maxwell, 2005). Triangulation of data methods also helps provide validity to your conclusions by looking at varied data sources. For example, observation data (how people act, mannerisms, facial expressions, etc.) provides insight into interview data (what people say) (Maxwell, 2005).

Ethical Considerations

Given that the researcher was employed in the same district as the participants of this study, it was critical that confidentiality was protected in both informal and formal ways. Informally, the researcher protected the participants by not revealing their identity or the name of their schools even in casual conversation with close colleagues. Formally, each participant and school was assigned a code for the data-reporting phase of the study. The codes indicated whether the school was an elementary, middle or high (ES, MS, or HS) and which of the three participants was being referred to (1, 2, or 3). For example, the data analysis referred to ES1 or HS3 to help distinguish which of the nine individuals was being referred to. Some participants shared highly personal yet poignant examples from their settings in these instances; there was no designation of which of the nine participants was being referred to. While the interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy, neither the participant’s name nor the name of the school were recorded unless the participant accidentally used names during their responses. In these cases, the names were not entered into the transcripts. The recordings will be stored on a password protected computer hard drive and will be deleted after a period of three years. The only

individuals who will be permitted to view the study records are University of South Florida professors who serve on the dissertation committee for this study, members of the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB), and members of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) if necessary. If results of this study are published, no information identifying the participants will be revealed.

Significance or Implications

Hord and Sommers (2008) assert that not only is the professional development research clear on the importance of professional learning conversations in a variety of forms, there is a “knowing-doing gap” in the practice in schools. Furthermore, a “precondition for any implementation is the belief that change can happen” (p. 70). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000), have developed surveys to be used to measure various facets of trust and their relationships to other constructs, however, they indicate that qualitative studies are also helpful to explore the dynamic nature of trust within specific contexts. Pajares (1992) determined that qualitative studies to examine beliefs related to action within specific contexts are needed. By documenting the experiences and beliefs of active assistant principals who are on the front line of implementation, this study sought to discover how these individuals perceive their opportunity or limitations to facilitate professional learning conversations among the teachers they supervise. This information can provide guidance for principals and district leaders in clarifying areas of need for continued professional development and process development to support the implementation of professional learning conversations in schools.

Pilot Study

Maxwell (2005) asserts that it is important to pilot test your interview questions with people who are most like participants in order to determine if they will work as intended. Therefore, a pilot of the data collection process including the written critical incident, and two interviews was conducted with a district assistant principal similarly situated in experience as the target population for this study in February 2010. From this pilot study, the researcher learned that participants would need explicit instructions on identifying a specific event as a critical incident; there would be a need for the first interview protocol to include some specific demographic and professional experience data to provide more context for the responses; and finally, the researcher realized that busy people would need time to respond and may also need reminders of designated appointments.

Timeline for Study

The qualitative interview process is difficult to layout in a projected timeline. There were many potential opportunities for delays due to the complexity of coordinating schedules for extended conversations with a number of busy people. This is compounded by the fact that the participants in this study were not a “captive audience” at any given time, but rather, were required to agree to meet with the researcher on a strictly volunteer basis. The researcher defended the proposal for this study on April 23, 2010, and applied for Institutional Review Board and school district permission on April 26, 2010. The final clearances were not received until mid-June 2010. The initial email invitations to participate were sent on June 13, 2010. This was the final week the APs were under

contract before summer vacation. Nonetheless, these nine participants responded favorably and all written critical incidents and first interviews were conducted by the first week in July. The second interviews were completed in late July through mid-August, 2010. Given the tight time line, and the voluntary nature of the project during summer vacation hours, the researcher anticipated more difficulty in recruiting participants. While nine of the 18 invited participants declined to participate or did not respond, the other nine were generous with their time and shared experiences. This willingness to participate may be attributed to the district's focus on professional learning conversations, or possibly to professional goodwill generated by the researcher's network of colleagues within the district. The researcher currently works in the district office – not in a supervisory capacity of assistant principals – but in a position that allows professional visibility to almost all secondary assistant principals.

Janesick (2004) estimates that a one-hour interview will generate about 21 single-spaced pages of transcript. This estimate was confirmed by this researcher's experience. The 18 total interviews each lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, taking approximately four hours each to transcribe. Initially, the researcher had anticipated 50 hours of transcription time, in actuality the project required approximately 72 hours. While this transcription was a time-consuming and expensive task, the written transcripts of the interviews were vital to providing validity, reliability and accuracy to the data analysis process.

Chapter IV

Analysis of the Data

This qualitative study sought to discover, document, and describe the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, social structures and processes of nine assistant principals related to professional learning conversations in their schools. The nine participants represented elementary, middle and high schools, three at each level. The study was conducted in a large urban school district in the southeastern United States. Current professional literature in the field of education and professional development research support a constructivist learning theory that asserts that people learn best when they interact with each other in groups (Lambert, 1998; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter & McDonald, 2007; Woolfolk Hoy & Hoy, 2003). As such, at the time of this study State Differentiated Accountability documents mandated that teachers be provided with common planning time to support professional learning communities (PLC). While there was wide assumption that professional learning conversations occur, the reality was that schools struggled with the time and the structure to support these conversations (Allen & LeBlanc, 2005; Glickman, 2002).

In the district where this study was conducted, the assistant principal job description indicates that the assistant principals of the schools interacted frequently with teachers, completed the teacher evaluations, developed team-meeting agendas and developed the master schedules. In addition to operational tasks, stated in the AP job description, such as “supervising student movement in all aspects of the program

including cafeteria, time-out room, buses, crowd control, hall traffic” are instructional leadership tasks such as “determining staffing needs including selection, supervision, staff development, and evaluation of all school personnel.” Marshall and Hooley (2006) confirm these roles for APs are typical. For this reason, assistant principals have a responsibility in the implementation and practice of professional learning conversations in schools. How these individuals perceive and experience this phenomenon will likely impact the effectiveness of the practice (Parjares, 1992). Gaining insight into nine assistant principals’ perceptions and experiences provides information for district leaders to focus professional development and strengthen the support structures for professional learning conversations in schools.

Method

This study used a written critical incident followed by two interviews to examine the phenomenon of professional learning conversations in schools. The purpose of the written critical incident was to anchor the discussion in an actual event in order to move away from general opinions and hypothetical speculation (Flannigan, 1954; Tripp, 1993). Each participant was asked to respond in writing to several questions defining the term “professional learning conversation,” and then to describe a specific event they witnessed or were a part of as an example of a professional learning conversation (see Appendix C). Two in-depth interviews followed this written critical incident, each about one month apart. The first interview protocol was designed to solicit demographical information about the participant’s work experiences in education and to get more detailed information about the critical incident they had written about. The second interview protocol was designed to gain deeper insight into how the individuals perceived the

element of trust in professional learning conversations. The critical incidents were written at the end of the school year 2010. The first set of interviews occurred in June of 2010, after the 2009-2010 school year ended. The second set of interviews occurred in late July and early August of 2010, before the 2010-2011 school year began. The interviews were conducted in the participants' offices at their schools during non-student contact hours or at a restaurant or coffee shop location convenient for the participant.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study sought to articulate a framework for discovering these assistant principals' lived experiences with regard to professional learning conversations. The conceptual framework for this study is founded at the crossroads of the distributed leadership theory (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004) and the constructivist learning theory (Lewin as cited in Gold, 1998; Palinscar, 1998; Sivan, 1986). These two theories support a view of teacher instructional growth as dependent upon physical and emotional structures that allow them to work collaboratively together (Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998; Showers & Joyce, 1996). The first two questions focused on the participants' attitudes and beliefs about professional learning conversations and the APs role in initiating or facilitating these conversations. The second two questions focused on their identification of elements of the trust building cycle (Vangen & Huxham, 2003) related to professional learning conversations and the AP's role or influence in building trust or mistrust. These questions were used as typologies to organize the themes that evolved from the data for this study (Hatch, 2002).

1. What are the attitudes and beliefs of these assistant principals regarding professional learning conversations as structures to support professional growth?
 - a. How does the structure (context, data sources, protocols, focus and impact) of the incident described indicate this perspective?
2. How do these assistant principals perceive their role in initiating or facilitating learning conversations?
 - a. What barriers do they identify?
 - b. What opportunities do they recognize?
3. How do these assistant principals identify elements of trust or mistrust within the critical incident described?
 - a. To what degree did participants exhibit shared expectations?
 - b. Were structures in place to manage risk levels for the participants?
 - c. How did group stability or instability influence the incident?
 - d. How did power structures within the group influence the incident?
4. How do these assistant principals perceive their role or influence in building trust or mistrust?
 - a. What barriers do they identify?
 - b. What opportunities do they recognize?

Participants

This study used a purposeful sampling of participants based on convenience. The participants were nine experienced assistant principals working in the same district. At the time of the study, three worked at the elementary school level, three worked at the middle school level, and three at the high school level. The researcher intentionally

sought out participants who were experienced, well trained and knowledgeable in their roles as assistant principals in order to increase the likelihood of sufficient experience with professional learning conversations to provide insightful perspective (Johnson, 2002). This section will provide an overview of how these individuals were selected and their career experiences and aspirations.

The initial individuals invited to participate in this study were assistant principals from schools the district's three regional superintendents identified as being "collaborative." The researcher contacted the regional superintendents via email to request that each identify five collaborative schools. The regional superintendents directly supervise the principals at their assigned schools and in this capacity they visit the schools regularly. This direct contact across multiple schools and their supervisory role made them a credible, objective source to identify schools they viewed as collaborative. In addition, the researcher sought to identify individuals having at least three years of administrative experience. To meet this requirement the researcher expanded the search and also invited some individuals from schools other than those identified by the regional superintendents. Although the original goal of the researcher was to interview APs most likely to be from collaborative schools, APs from schools not identified as collaborative were invited in order to reach the desired sample size with the desired years experience as APs. The researcher had no information about the levels of collaboration at the additional schools prior to the study. A total of eighteen assistant principals were invited via email. Of those, nine accepted the invitation, five from schools identified as collaborative and four from other schools. The other nine either did not respond or were unable to meet the time constraints of the study. The initial goal was

to identify a total of six to nine people with representation from each level (elementary, middle and high). This goal was successfully met. In order to better frame the responses of these participants within a meaningful context, an overview of their career experiences is provided.

All of the participants had completed or were enrolled in the district's principal preparation program. The district's principal preparation program was open by recommendation only to APs who had a minimum of two year's administrative experience. Upon successful completion of this two-year program, candidates could apply for principal certification. The seven participants who were in the mid-range of their careers were all aspiring principals, with four actively seeking principal opportunities. The two with thirty or more years said that earlier in their careers they had desired a school principal position, but this opportunity had never been presented. Their educational careers ranged from 10 to 32 years of experience, with 16 as the median number of years. They had been assistant principals for a range of three to 11 years, with 5 years as the median number of years. Five of the nine participants were white females, three were black females, and one was a white male. While they evenly represented each level at the time of the study, eight out of nine had taught middle school at some point in their careers and only one out of nine had taught high school. As teachers their experiences were in social studies, language arts, and math. Three had an extensive exceptional student education background. Five of the nine had held teacher leader positions outside of the classroom prior to becoming an administrator, i.e. reading coach, resource teacher, behavior specialist, etc. Table 1 presents a visual representation of the APs' demographic and career experience discussed in this section.

Table 1

Assistant Principals' (AP) Demographic and Career Experience (exp.)

AP	Gender	Race	Years teaching exp.	Subject taught	School level of teaching	Years exp. as AP	School level as AP	Total years exp. in schools
ES1	Female	W	12	ESE	ES	5	ES	17
ES2	Female	W	6	Geography	MS	6	ES/MS	12
ES3	Female	W	9 4	Reading Coach	MS MS/HS	3	ES/MS	16
MS1	Female	W	7 5	ESE Specialist	MS MS	4	MS	16
MS2	Female	B	8	Geography	MS	5	MS	13
MS3	Female	W	7 15	ESE Specialist	MS MS/HS	10	MS	32
HS1	Male	W	2 8	Math Math	MS HS	8	MS/HS	16
HS2	Female	B	19	All	MS	11	HS	30
HS3	Female	B	4 3	Reading Coach	MS HS	3	HS	10

Note. Abbreviations used in this table: elementary school (ES); middle school (MS); high school (HS); exceptional student education (ESE); white (W); and black (B).

The participants were asked why they pursued a career in administration, the themes that emerged in response were, personal advancement ($n=2$), the encouragement of previous administrators ($n=2$), and a desire to have a larger impact ($n=5$). Of those who desired the opportunity for a larger impact, three mentioned they wanted a larger

impact on (more) students, one wanted to have a larger impact on curriculum, only one mentioned a desire to have a larger impact on school-wide teaching capacity. All nine indicated that as teachers they had been given leadership roles within their schools. Four specifically mentioned that a principal or an assistant principal had acted as a mentor to them. Five talked about their job experiences between teaching and administration such as behavior specialist, reading coach, and varying exceptionalities specialist. Three mentioned the opportunities they were given as “acting administrators” or a formal internship. Two mentioned their graduate course work. Three participants mentioned principals who actively pulled them in to all types of responsibilities, giving them a fuller view of the complexity of the job. Three mentioned the importance of time as critical in the preparation process. As one participant expressed it, “The State says I’m qualified to become a principal...but I think the stakes are higher now when it comes to student achievement and I think there’s a big difference between managing a school and being that educational leader.” All three of these participants who reported time as a key to principal preparation went on to mention negative examples of individuals who had moved quickly through the ranks, but floundered when they became principals.

When asked about characteristics of a principal they would like to emulate, the key theme was the importance of relationship building -- relationships with community, with students, and with faculty. Related to relationships are sub themes of communication, consensus building, dedication and commitment. One AP expressed, “My principal would know what he wanted to happen, but would make everyone feel they were part of it.” The second characteristic they wanted to emulate was to clearly define school processes – thinking things through and acting consistently. One AP

explained, “My principal always had a process for everything and the process was very clear. This helped me when I needed to talk with teachers about something that was not working.” Two of the APs mentioned negative examples related to lack of fairness and favoritism. Both related incidents where the principal routinely held grudges against individuals who had done something to disappoint them.

Although the career experiences of these individuals were varied, the primary influence on their leadership styles had been the leaders they trained under. Most of them determined by positive example what a good leader does, while two stated they had learned by negative example what not to do. The two primary themes that emerged from their experiences were that good leaders build positive relationships and good leaders implement effective processes. This overview of these assistant principals’ formative career experiences provided the researcher a context or lens through which to analyze their unique responses. Who they are as individuals is critical to the meaning making process (Kvale, 1996).

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study began as soon as the first critical incidents were received and continued after each interview. The written critical incidents served as a conversation starting point for the first set of interviews to anchor the participant responses in a specific incident. The first interview protocol asked the participants to expand upon their description of the incident they had written about. As such the data from the written critical incident flowed into the data for the interview during analysis. The researcher transcribed each of the first set of interviews personally. This transcription process allowed the researcher to interact closely with the spoken words of the

participants to examine the content of each interview. Due to time constraints, the researcher hired a typist to transcribe the second set of interviews. However, after each transcript was completed, the researcher carefully reviewed the recorded interview comparing it to the transcript to ensure accuracy. Once again, this careful review allowed the researcher to listen to the spoken words of the participants in order to interact with the content of the collective interviews. The transcripts were sent back to each of the participants to provide the opportunity to clarify or extend the content. Once the transcripts were completed and printed, the researcher conducted a series of multiple readings to begin to find themes and patterns in the text. Each transcript was printed a second time using colored paper to distinguish the three different levels of administrators interviewed (elementary, middle and high). The researcher used codes to identify each of the participants. The letters "ES" signified elementary school, the letters "MS" signified middle school, and the letters "HS" signified high school. The numbers one, two, or three, identified which of the participants at each level were being referred to. Thus "ES1" was used to refer to the first elementary level participant, "ES2" is the second elementary participant, and "HS3" referred to the third high school level participant. This was done to protect the identity of the participants yet allow a way to distinguish one participant from another. Next, the researcher cut each interview into sections after each question. All nine of the responses for each question were glued to a piece of chart paper. This clear visual for each question allowed the researcher to get a global view of the variety of answers provided and facilitated the process of summarizing each response and looking for patterns, themes, and relationships, noting the frequency of certain types of responses.

The researcher then established four typologies using the research questions as a framework (Hatch, 2002). The four typologies used were:

- Attitudes and beliefs about professional learning conversations for teacher growth
- Perceptions of the AP role in initiating or facilitating professional learning conversations
- Elements of trust related to professional learning conversations
- Perceptions of the AP role in building trust or mistrust

When beginning the typology analysis, the researcher read the entire data set through four times looking for evidence of each of the typologies with each reading. The researcher grouped the text by participant and by typology, creating 36 sections (four typologies by nine participants). Each of the 36 sections was coded with a participant code (ES1 for elementary school participant one, MS3 for middle school participant three, etc.) and page number from the original transcripts. The researcher printed each of the newly created and coded 36 sections of text again using a different color of paper for each of the participant school levels. Looking at each of the printed sections individually, the researcher created a summary of distinct ideas using a separate sheet of paper for each participant and each typology, continuing the color-coding by level. Additionally, in another configuration of the data, the summary statements within each typology were arranged by participant. These summary statements were sent to each of the participants for confirmation or clarification to ensure the accuracy of the summaries.

Next, the researcher read the summary statements sorted both by typology and then by participant searching for patterns, relationships and themes, and finally created a visual representation for each of the typologies (Tables 2 - 5) upon which to record the

themes that emerged. Ultimately, four themes were identified within each typology. Ideas presented by only one or two participants were omitted for the sake of focus unless they were in direct contrast to statements made by others (Hatch 2002).

In the next step, the researcher went back to the 36 sections of data and coded the text with the potential patterns, relationships and themes identified in the summaries. In this process, the researcher was able to determine if the potential patterns, relationships and themes identified were supported by the data and the researcher was able to check to see if other important insights existed, but were not included. Once the patterns, relationships and themes were identified, the researcher reread the entire original data set to determine if anything there contradicted the findings or served as non-examples (Hatch, 2002). Finally, the researcher looked across the separately identified concepts to search for connections across the findings. The findings from across the typologies were then distilled into five generalizations (Hatch, 2002). These generalizations are presented at the conclusion of this chapter. The following sections in this chapter explain the themes identified within each typology. It is important to note that remaining consistent with qualitative methodology, the findings presented here sought to describe how these individuals perceived the phenomenon of professional learning conversations in their schools. Their experiences have been connected back to existing related literature; however, their perceptions cannot be presented or defended as objective reality (Johnson, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Tierney & Dilley, 2002).

Research Question One: What Are the Attitudes and Beliefs of These Assistant Principals Regarding Professional Learning Conversations as Structures to Support Professional Growth?

The term professional learning conversation was used in this study to refer to professional dialogue that supports educators in reflecting upon their practice. These conversations may occur between pairs or groups of educators and are focused upon teaching and learning. Possible topics for these conversations might include peer coaching, curriculum mapping, lesson planning discussion, reflection on a recent teaching or learning experience, study of student work, school improvement planning or data analysis (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

The purpose of the written critical incident was to orient the participant to the topic that would be discussed during the interviews. In the critical incident protocol the participant was asked to provide a general definition of a professional learning conversation and then to provide an example of something that actually occurred. The definition a participant gave may reflect the perceived correct answer more than the participants true beliefs, while the description of a specific incident provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the participants' attitudes and beliefs about the phenomenon studied (Flannigan, 1954; Tripp, 1993). Consistent with the critical incident technique developed by Flannigan (1954), in this study the written critical incident protocol asked each participant to do three things: (1) define the term *professional learning conversation*; (2) state the general aim of professional learning conversations; and (3) describe a specific example of a professional learning conversation they had facilitated or participated in. The analysis of the definition and aim portion of the written

critical incident was a simple comparison process in that the definitions they provided, though not identical, were remarkably similar. All of the assistant principals' definitions indicated that professional learning conversations were valuable for improving professional practice by influencing educators to "think outside their own experience...to advance teacher learning...and to improve or enhance teacher performance." Responses prompted in the question about the general aim of professional learning conversations included, "use data to improve instructional practices...focus on improving the learning environment...build professional competence through emotional and intellectual support...and exploring options, research and new ideas for improvement." While the definitions and the stated aims of a *professional learning conversation* provided by the participants were quite similar, the actual incidents they described were as unique as the individuals involved.

The example incidents described in the written critical incident and then again in the first interviews revealed a discrepancy in their stated definition and aims of professional learning conversations and in the actual practice at some schools. They all reported that a "professional learning conversation" should lead to professional growth, but four of the nine APs could not connect the example incident back to teacher growth evidenced by changed practice. Across all levels, six of the nine participants described a specific project or task that school administrators needed to accomplish. These projects included Response to Intervention implementation, writing focus lessons, a school-wide laptop initiative, planning a faculty presentation, Positive Behavior Support implementation, and researching schedule options. One AP reported on a behavior data discussion she facilitated with a grade level team, and another described her work with an

individual teacher. Despite remarkably similar statements in the written critical incidents regarding the definition and purpose of professional learning conversations, their specific examples varied in purpose, in intended outcome, in content, and in physical structure.

The first research question sought to discover the general attitudes and beliefs of these APs toward professional learning conversations for teacher growth. Four general categories related to their attitudes and beliefs emerged from the examples described in the written critical incident and the interviews. These were: (1) the general purposes of professional learning conversation; (2) supporting structures for professional learning conversations; (3) the professional orientation of the individual AP; and (4) the AP's orientation toward teachers.

Attitudes and beliefs related to the general purposes of professional learning conversations. Hord and Sommers (2008) present a vision of professional learning conversations as focused on both whole faculty collective learning and continuous individual learning. Yet, they also discuss the problem of the “knowing and doing” gap. They assert that often what we know to be best practice gets lost in the real-world application. This may be true when it comes to the practice of professional learning conversations in many schools. In this study, when asked directly, all of the assistant principals reported on the value of professional learning conversations as a medium for teacher professional growth. However, there was a discrepancy between the stated belief and the actual practice for some of the schools in the examples they provided. Through the example incidents described, some revealed a belief that the purpose of professional learning conversations was for teacher growth; some saw the purpose as more task-

oriented, and some saw the purpose as learning through the accomplishment of a specific task.

The elementary APs most clearly articulated a belief that the general purpose of professional learning conversations was that they were a unique form of on-going teacher professional development. “When we hold a meeting, you’re going to walk away with something that you can do in your classroom to improve your practice” (ES1). The three elementary APs all described conversations that took place within regularly scheduled Professional Learning Community (PLC) time at their schools, and also discussed the importance of informal conversations that occur throughout the school day. While in contrast, the high school APs tended toward a view of the professional learning conversations as being an episodic and task oriented event not directly connected to professional development. For example, one high school AP reported on a group of teachers researching various scheduling options and another described several teachers planning a faculty presentation. These were both isolated tasks from which the APs could not identify any observable teacher growth or change in instructional practice. In both cases the purpose of the task was to gather information to relay to the staff. Once this was accomplished, there was no further discussion or follow up. HS1 explains, “Since the staff voted not to make a change, we never actually had to go out and do the development part.”

However, in the cross section of a view of professional learning conversations as a medium for professional growth and a view of them being task oriented events, six APs saw teacher growth as a by-product occurring within the context of completing a specific project relevant to the improvement of instruction within the school. “Teachers may not

go into a project anticipating personal growth, but if the process is carefully and thoughtfully structured as a learning experiences, growth can occur” (MS3). It is important to strive to understand what these APs believe about professional learning conversations because their “values and beliefs guide the behavior” (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Attitudes and beliefs related to the physical and emotional structures of professional learning conversations. Both physical and emotional structures support or undermine the occurrence of professional learning conversations in schools. These structures include time and space for these conversations, communication structures, and relational factors (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Through the example incidents provided by the participants of this study, four types of organizational structures that impact professional learning conversations were identified. These were: (1) physical classroom proximity; (2) formal versus informal conversations; (3) time constraints and schedules; (4) and social and emotional climate. These themes are consistent with the findings of Hord and Sommers.

From the perspective of these APs, teachers who work in close proximity and see each other throughout the day may be more likely to engage in professional learning conversations. Five of the nine APs talked about recent changes in classroom assignments made to physically group teachers for better collaboration. Primarily this was done in grade level teams at the elementary and middle school levels. One high school was moving away from cross content teams that worked with a cohort of students, back to content specific teams. Several APs mentioned that the changes in classroom assignments, though unpopular with teachers initially, were considered worth the effort to

increase collaboration. “It was a painful process... we moved all of our obsessive compulsives this year...they are grouped by grade levels in hallways now, and I think that’s going to help even more” (ES1).

In the experience of these APs, informal conversations lay the groundwork for formal learning conversations. Seven out of nine APs viewed informal conversations as either important precursors to more formal conversations, or saw informal conversations as more effective in general. Informal conversations would typically happen casually within course of the workday, in contrast to formal conversations which would occur at structured times. “I think when it becomes too formal...people feel like they are being forced into something” (MS3). Others referred to bus circle and lunch duty conversations as typical opportunities for learning conversations. MS2 explained, “I like to do more informal things because I think you get more honest answers.” These individuals talked about laying the groundwork for learning conversations through a series of smaller conversations, through casual conversations in the bus circle, and through discovering the teachers’ comfort level and areas of concern by asking the right questions. “I feel I have better conversations with teachers in unplanned times than planned” (ES1). Lambert’s (1998) concept of “feedback loops” reinforces the idea of purposeful informal conversations as groundwork for more formal conversations. Lambert’s feedback loops call for administrators to seek out the informal leaders in the school to discuss new ideas, proposed changes, or matters of concern prior to these topics coming into play in a larger, formal setting. The feedback loop process allows leaders to hear individual responses and allows followers to have time to process the ideas. Similarly, MS3 described this process as “seed planting:”

My role on the staff has always been to get my seeds planted and I do that well. I meet with individuals casually...talking to them...getting their ideas, picking their brains...making them feel a part of the process and then having them come on board. Without this, I don't think you can get enriching dialogue going. When you have a seed planted, you can get the dialogue. I think sometimes when you're giving information to a group of people and they don't really know...it is fresh...it's really not in their repertoire at all...they don't know enough to generate the questions...I mean, you don't know the question to ask if you don't know. That's when people react negatively.

Time constraints and schedules were discussed by the majority of the secondary APs as structures that negatively impacted professional learning conversations in their schools. The middle and high school APs spoke about how difficult it is for teachers to teach six out of seven periods per day, and the limited time before and after school for professional learning conversations. Although some schools were planning to institute common planning periods for the following year, HS1 explained, "there is a lack of time for in-depth conversations. We can't ask teachers to give up their planning period to sit with other teachers. They're entitled to that time through their contract." However, even the elementary APs talked about time as a limiting factor. ES2 talked about a "one-legged interview" as a common type of professional learning conversation, because "you're always trying to get it done quickly when you can."

The physical structure of classroom proximity, the formal or informal nature of the conversation, and the time and schedule constraints are all tangible structures these

APs identified. In addition, they identified the social and emotional climate of the school as a structure that impacted the level and the quality of the collaboration that occurred. This climate is impacted by the overarching culture of the school, the individual relationships between teachers, and the relationships between the teachers and administrators. All eight of the female APs exhibited an awareness of the social and emotional climate within a faculty as an important influence on the success of professional learning conversations. This was evident from the stories and examples they shared throughout the interviews. MS3 provided a poignant example of the impact of social and emotional climate on the willingness of teachers to collaborate openly. In her example, the only professional learning venue at the school was individual teachers watching video clips of big name educational consultants presenting to audiences. These professional development videos provided motivating content with fresh ideas. However, the only format for follow up discussion was through blog style emails. This AP believed that the lack of face-to-face interaction and a larger culture of fear in the school prevented any meaningful transference of the ideas. The faculty, including this AP, because of the climate of fear, was not willing to share true reactions or to question ideas presented.

MS3 explained:

I wanted to know from the teachers, did you really think about this...how do you feel about this...do you agree or disagree? But they were afraid to publicly (in writing) ask for clarification or to express a dissenting view. They were just parroting what they heard because they wanted to impress the boss.

This AP admitted that she found it difficult to be motivated to take the time to read or respond to what others had written when she believed it not to be authentic. These APs reported that tangible structures such as classroom proximity, formal or informal conversations, and schedules, as well as less tangible structures such as the social and emotional climate of the schools impact the occurrence and quality of professional learning conversations.

Attitudes and beliefs related to the APs' own professional orientation. Research literature confirms that there is often a tension between a school administrator's role as an instructional leader and the traditional roles of managing a school (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998). In this section, the term *professional orientation* is used as a term to capture what the APs perceived to be the primary function of their jobs related to professional learning conversations. Through the stories they told and the examples they provided, they revealed that: (1) they see themselves as process managers; (2) they aspire to continuous personal growth; and (3) to be reflective practitioners; but (4) they acknowledge that administrators may be lacking in knowledge or focus. The role of being process managers was ever present in their examples. They all talked about tasks such as calling meetings, setting agendas, assigning rooms, evaluating teachers, processing disciplinary referrals, developing master schedules and implementing projects as being major functions of their jobs.

However, most of the APs also indicated a professional orientation toward continuous personal growth. Those that saw themselves as continuous learners made comments such as, "All training, anything we learn, professional articles, anything we read to build our own instructional tool kit, we bring back to share with teachers. We are

the role models as continuous learners” (ES2). HS2 and MS2 spoke enthusiastically about having recently attended summer institutes with their teachers. “When we were in that setting away from the school, we had the opportunity to learn together outside of the traditional administrator and teacher role. I began to appreciate them in a new light” (MS2).

Five out of nine (including all three elementary APs) described a professional orientation toward personal reflective practice. Some referred to their own personal reflection in the context of relaying incidents that occurred saying things like, “In retrospect, I can see I should have...” or “next time I will...” Others made direct statements such as, “I always try to be reflective.”

In spite of their desire for personal growth, six out of nine mentioned that school-based administrators (either themselves or others) may have gaps in their knowledge or focus related to professional learning conversations. For example, HS3 stated that she had only recently learned about protocols as conversation structures, and had not yet used them. MS2 flatly admitted that she had never been taught how to facilitate a professional learning conversation. HS1 noted that not all secondary assistant principals had the opportunity to grow as instructional leaders. He explained that as an assistant principal for curriculum, he met regularly with the district curriculum director and his principal. However, in his experience he had seen that if an AP is in charge of facilities, textbooks, or athletics, rather than curriculum, the opportunity for development as an instructional leader is limited. Yet, HS1 reports that all assistant principals in his school conduct teacher evaluations and all assistant principals are expected to be instructional leaders.

ES3 articulated the problems that can arise when APs do not have the training or knowledge they need:

An administrator can get in the way by having in mind a predetermined outcome (for a professional learning conversation), and then not having all the pieces to the puzzle. Administrators tend to be task oriented. We want to make sure that task occurs, but sometimes the task can outweigh the conversation (ES3).

While the experiences of these individuals varied widely, their dialogue revealed that they see themselves as process managers, many of them aspire to be continuous learners, and most of them valued reflective practice. They also expressed a concern that not all APs have the knowledge they need to support professional learning conversations.

Attitudes and beliefs related to the APs' orientation toward teachers. In this section, the phrase *orientation toward teachers* is used to capture how these APs view teachers relative to professional learning conversations. How these APs view teachers is important because building an environment conducive to collaboration requires an administrative perspective that values shared leadership with teachers and a redistribution of power and authority (Fullen, 2008a; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). These APs indicated through their stories and examples a general belief that many teachers did value learning from and with colleagues, however some teachers may be lacking in knowledge of how to learn from other teachers while others are simply resistant to change. These APs report that many teachers do value learning from and with their team members, especially when they were working on a problem of personal significance with trusted colleagues. "I have two ninth

grade teachers who have their own PLC. That's what they do, they bounce things off of each other" (HS2). "It is helpful to teachers when they can ask each other things like, what have you done for fluency? Or, say I had that same kid and this is what worked" (ES1). However, MS2 and HS2 both stated that other teachers needed a model of what professional learning conversations would look like, indicating that some teachers may have lacked knowledge of how to learn from colleagues. Representative statements include, "another barrier is teachers not knowing...if they don't know what to ask, they don't know...if they haven't seen had a meaningful professional learning conversation, they don't know what we're asking them to do." In addition, some teachers were resistant to changing their instructional practices.

Twenty percent of your teachers will go with you no matter what you suggest. Sixty percent will follow if you can make it enticing enough and the other 20 percent, you're going to be dragging them and pulling them no matter what you do, and they can sometimes try to bring down everybody else. Administrators can just say it is an expectation. However, what do you do if they don't come or if they come and don't participate? We can't make them collaborate (ES2).

The ideas expressed by these APs relative to their view of teachers' participation in professional learning conversations seem to question that all teachers are prepared for or willing to accept shared leadership.

This section presented the themes that emerged related to research question one regarding the APs' beliefs and attitudes toward professional learning conversations. In summary, despite relatively similar written descriptions of the definition and aim of

professional learning conversations, the lived experiences the APs shared in both the written critical incidents and the interviews revealed varying attitudes and beliefs. All three elementary APs demonstrated a view of professional learning conversations as a unique form of professional development, while only one middle school and one high school AP presented this perspective. Of this group, the two secondary APs who viewed professional learning conversations as a meaningful form of professional development, were also the two APs with 30 years experience as educators. The high school APs were most likely to report barriers that prevented professional learning conversation such as time, proximity and interpersonal relationships. Also, the middle and high school APs were most likely to indicate either directly or by example a lack of knowledge or focus on their part or on the part of their colleagues related to how to facilitate professional learning conversations. Finally, the middle and high school APs were most likely to indicate a lack of knowledge or resistance on the part of teacher regarding collaboration. Table 2 provides a visual summary of the themes and sub-themes that emerged and the individual participant responses to research question one.

Table 2

Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Reported by Participants Related to Research Question One Regarding the Assistant Principals' Attitudes and Beliefs Toward Professional Learning Conversations

<i>Purpose</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Teacher growth oriented	x	x	x			x		x	
Task oriented							x		x
Specific task initiated with teach growth focus	x		x	x	x	x		x	
<i>Structures</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Classroom proximity	x	x	x		x		x	x	
Formal/informal conversations	x	x		x	x	x		x	x
Time constraints or schedules	x				x	x	x	x	x
Social/emotional considerations	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
<i>Professional orientation</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Process management	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Continuous personal growth	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Administrators lacking knowledge or focus (self or others)			x		x	x	x	x	x
Reflective practice	x	x	x			x		x	
<i>Orientation toward teachers</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Teachers value learning from and with colleagues	x		x	x	x			x	x
Teachers lacking knowledge		x			x	x		x	x
Teachers resistant to change		x		x	x	x	x		x

Note. The asterisk indicates the participants from schools identified by the regional superintendents as being collaborative. Abbreviations used in this table: elementary school (ES); middle school (MS); and high school (HS).

Research Question Two: How Do These Assistant Principals Perceive Their Role in Initiating or Facilitating Learning Conversations?

The first research question sought to reveal the APs' attitudes and beliefs regarding professional learning conversations for professional growth. This next section will examine the second research question, which sought to move to a more personal level, to discover how these APs perceived their roles in initiating or facilitating learning conversations. Through their written descriptions of the critical incident and through the interview data, four patterns emerged. To varying degrees they saw themselves as (1) managers of school processes; (2) resources to teachers; (3) facilitators of the dialogue; and (4) co-learners with their teachers. The following section will discuss these themes and the sub-themes that emerged.

AP as a manager of school processes. When an administrator “uses the authority of the position to convene and sustain the conversation...the school is on a sure road toward building leadership capacity” (Lambert, 1998, p. 27)). As managers of school processes the APs expressed through the stories they told and the examples they provided that they controlled the environment for professional learning conversations, they established a vision for collaboration, they took personal responsibility for the outcome of their actions, and they set agendas, developed timelines and assigned tasks. The strongest role articulated was to be the person in control of the environment. This responsibility included planning the learning conversations through the use of ground rules, protocols or guiding questions. As an example, ES1 shared, “we set a specific amount of time where each teacher simply talks and describes the student and their academic challenges...” In addition to conversation structures, MS2 and MS3 both talked

about the physical structures they use to set the stage for collaboration such as the arrangement of the chairs (i.e. pairs or a circle), music and food.

Next, as managers of the process, they saw themselves responsible for the outcomes of their actions. “Someone might say something great ‘just happened.’ It didn’t just happen. Let me tell you how it happened. It happened because we did this step, that step, and this step. We followed through here. We got training there” (MS3). Again, as managers of the process, five out of nine APs (all elementary, one middle and one high) articulated that their role was to establish and communicate the vision for collaboration. “It is really about building that learning culture in the school...having that vision of all adults and students being lifelong learners” ES1). In contrast, two of the high school APs saw their primary role as setting agendas and timelines, and assigning tasks:

So, what I did was to keep the conversation going forward, always stopping to summarize at the end, this is our next task, this is the next meeting, these are the things that we as a group have decided need to be done... Suzie, please do this. Johnny, please do this between now and the next meeting (HS1).

While they all saw themselves as managers of school processes, some reported it was their role to set the vision for collaboration and thoughtfully plan and facilitate learning opportunities while others described the more traditional managerial tasks of setting agendas and assigning tasks.

AP as a resource to teachers. Blase and Kirby (2000), discuss the importance of administrators providing adequate resources and support for teachers. “Teachers are all too often judged on the basis of student outcomes, with little regard for the difference in

resources available” (p. 27). The APs in this study reported that they aspired to be a resource to teachers in four ways (1) to be knowledgeable about instructional best practices; (2) to serve as mentors and coaches to teachers; (3) to take time and make time for professional learning conversations; and (4) to make connections between people materials and ideas. They expressed a desire to be knowledgeable about instructional best practices, making comments such as, “I want to know what’s going on, I want to know more than my teachers, and I want to be able to contribute to their growth” (HS2).

Five APs (scattered across the levels) saw that a part of their role as a resource was to serve as mentors and coaches to teachers. As knowledgeable instructional leaders, they provided ideas for teaching strategies or behavior management, and counseled teachers through problem solving processes. These APs talked about teachers who approach them with questions or concerns seeking guidance or advice. Another concept that surfaced with many of the APs was that they try to both take time, but also make time to talk with teachers and for teachers to talk with each other. “Sometimes in the lunchroom or on breakfast duty I can say, hey I noticed blah, blah, blah, something that really caught my eye, so you can move the conversation along in small ways” (HS2). ES1 explained, “I try to be available if a teacher needs me... if I’m busy at the moment, I make sure I get back to them as soon as possible.” Additionally, the majority (all elementary, two middle and one high school) saw a part of their role as a resource to make connections between people, materials and ideas. One example of how they might connect teachers was to provide a structure that allows teachers to visit one another’s classrooms. The AP’s contribution might be in securing substitute teachers to cover classes, or developing an observation and feedback protocol. This is consistent with the

work of Allen and LeBlanc (2005) and Showers and Joyce (1996) who propose peer-coaching models for professional development where teachers visit each other's classrooms. MS3 explained her approach,

I started covering classes for a while to get teachers out to visit each other's classrooms. I know it is difficult for administrators to do this, but they can do it. Just work with teacher's lesson plans or have them swap planning periods...just go in and see. Once they do, they don't stop talking about it. It's so reinforcing (MS3).

The majority of these APs spoke about specific things they could do to be a resource to teachers such as being knowledgeable about instructional best practices, serving as mentors and coaches, taking and making time available to talk with teachers, and helping teachers connect with others in the building.

AP as a facilitator of the dialogue. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter and McDonald (2007) assert that dialogue focused on personal and organizational growth does not naturally flow without purposeful structure. They espouse the use of conversation "protocols" implemented with skilled facilitators to provide this structure. Through the stories they told and the examples they provided the APs identified four tasks they perform as facilitators of professional learning conversations. These are: (1) mediating of inter-personal conflicts; (2) tailoring their message to the audience; (3) asking probing questions to guide the conversation; (4) and providing structured engagement opportunities. The strongest pattern to emerge was the AP's role in mediating inter-personal conflicts objectively.

I had to sit down with our second grade PLC. They're young and bright and energetic, but they all have very different personalities. There were lots of little individual conversations I had had with them about their concerns and then I realized this needs to be resolved...we need to sit-down and have a conversation together to air it out and move forward. Once we did that, things got much better, and several of them came back and thanked me (ES1).

Secondly, as facilitators of professional learning conversations, five APs (two elementary, two middle, and one high) indicated a belief in their responsibility to know their teachers and tailor their message to meet their individual needs. "I think we don't get to know teachers well enough sometimes before we want to jump in and make judgments" (HS2). This role of understanding their audience encompasses the need to ask probing questions. "Knowing my teachers helps me frame the right question, and conversations are built on questions" (MS2). The APs reported that this differentiation of communication was a way to value the professionalism of teachers. "You just can't go up to people and start saying, 'let's have an instructional conversation!' You've got to first learn who they are (HS2). "You don't have to start from the beginning with every teacher" (MS3). "My teachers participate because they know I value their time" (MS1). Whether introducing a new project or presenting a new strategy, the APs recognized that framing their message appropriately for the audience was a part of their role as facilitators.

All but two high school APs expressed that it is the AP's role as a facilitator to provide structured engagement opportunities for teachers. This structured engagement

also involves asking probing questions to guide learning conversations. ES1 explained, “Our protocol was designed to keep asking questions and to work through the problem solving process.” All three elementary APs referred to a common format used to guide and record PLC conversations in their schools. MS2 stated, “Before I showed them the discipline data, I asked them to predict what it would say. When they saw it, I simply asked them to talk about what they noticed. It was a powerful conversation. They got the point, without me lecturing them.” The APs recognized that while there is power in the collective learning of the group, successful learning conversations require leadership and occasional intervention (McDonald, et al., 2007).

In the beginning you provide all the structure and then you kind of just let them go. You’re there more just as a facilitator as their learning continues.

When I saw them struggling, I would ask the right question to get them going in the right direction (ES3).

AP as a co-learner with teachers. McDonald, et al (2007) discuss the importance of self efficacy for teachers and administrators. They assert that it is important for educators to project confidence in the directions provided to students and teachers. However, the danger in this stance is that it is possible to lose sight of the need to revise our practice when presented with new information. The three previously discussed roles; the AP as manager, the AP as a resource, and the AP as a facilitator, all carry a leadership connotation. While they can be fulfilled in an egalitarian and democratic fashion, they are conducted from leadership stance. Whereas with the final pattern to emerge, the AP as a co-learner, the AP steps outside of the leadership role and participates as a partner. They identified four actions related to being co-learners. They were: (1) listen to learn; (2) ask

questions to understand; (3) participate as a colleague; (4) and be self-reflective. As co-learners within professional learning conversations the strongest pattern to emerge (all but two high school APs) was the AP's need to listen to learn. "I like to talk, but I'm also learning to listen. I am learning to take myself out of the conversations as the point person" (MS2). A subset of listening to learn was to ask questions to understand. "When you start out asking probing questions, then you can find out where that person is coming from" (ES3). In addition, five APs (all elementary, one middle and one high) reported the value of participating in the conversation fully as a colleague and the need to be self-reflective. "I have said to teachers, I don't have all the answers and I know you don't have all the answers, but we are going to stay positive, realistic, but positive, and take it a step at a time, helping each other" (HS2).

This section has examined the participants' responses relative to research question two. In summary, when seeking to understand the APs perceptions of their role in facilitating or initiating professional learning conversations, four themes emerged. To varying degrees they saw themselves as; (1) managers of the process; (2) resources to teachers, (3) facilitators of the dialogue; and (4) co-learners with their teachers. The elementary APs appeared to be most closely engaged with their teachers in professional learning conversations. They demonstrated this connection in the ways they characterized their roles as initiators or facilitators of learning conversations. For example, all three elementary APs articulated a belief that they were responsible to set a vision for collaboration in their schools. They all saw themselves as a resource to teachers by being knowledgeable about instructional best practices, by taking the time and making the time to be available to support teachers, and by making connections between people, materials

and ideas to support collaboration. As facilitators of professional learning conversations, they all talked about their roles in mediating inner-personal conflicts, valued the skill of asking probing questions to guide learning conversations, and sought to provide structured engagement opportunities for their teachers. Finally, each of them expressed an aspiration to be co-learners with their teachers. While each of the secondary APs shared some of these same characteristics, MS3 and HS2, the two most experienced APs, stand out among the other secondary administrators as being more closely engaged with their teachers in professional learning conversations than the other secondary APs. This is evidenced by the descriptors discussed in this section. HS1, the only male, shared the fewest numbers of these descriptors. These trends are depicted in Table 3, which provides a visual summary of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the participants' responses related to research question two.

Table 3

Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Related to Research Question Two Regarding the Assistant Principals' Perception of Their Roles in Initiating or Facilitating Professional Learning Conversations

<i>AP as a Manager</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Control the environment	x		x	x	x	x		x	
Establish vision	x	x	x	x				x	
Take personal responsibility		x		x	x	x		x	
Set agenda & timelines, assign tasks				x	x		x		x
<i>AP as a Resource</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Knowledgeable about instructional best practices	x	x	x		x	x		x	x
Serve as a mentor and coach to teachers	x		x			x		x	x
Take time/make time	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	
Make connections between people, materials, ideas	x	x	x	x		x		x	
<i>AP as a Facilitator</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Mediate inter-personal conflicts	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Tailor the message to the audience	x		x		x	x		x	
Ask probing questions to guide conversation	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	
Provide structured engagement opportunities	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	
<i>AP as a Co-learner</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Listen to learn	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	
Ask questions to understand	x		x		x	x			
Participate as colleague	x	x	x			x		x	
Be self reflective	x	x	x			x		x	

Note. The asterisk indicates the participants from schools identified by the regional superintendents as being collaborative. Abbreviations used in this table: elementary school (ES); middle school (MS); and high school (HS).

Research Question Three: How Do These Assistant Principals Identify Elements of Trust or Mistrust Within the Critical Incident Described?

Research questions one and two examined the APs attitude, beliefs and perceived roles toward professional learning conversations. Research questions three and four look more specifically at the element of trust within and surrounding these conversations. Research question three starts by looking at the awareness these APs had of trust elements in their school. All nine assistant principals articulated nuanced awareness and sensitivity to elements of trust between their teachers and themselves and between their teachers as colleagues. This was evidenced by the stories they told of their interactions with teachers. All nine expressed an optimistic belief that the teachers they work with generally trust them as individuals. They made comments such as, “I think my teachers trust me” and then provided examples that lead them to this belief such as, “they come to me when they have a concern.” In addition, all nine recognized behaviors they personally could exhibit and conditions that they could influence that would be likely to build trust, “they know I am fair...I try to be consistent...I share what I am thinking...” etc. Bryk and Schneider (2003) confirm these behaviors as those that are likely to increase levels of trust.

Yet, there was variance in the levels of pervasiveness of trust they described within their buildings. If one envisioned the schools in this study represented on a continuum that ranged from low levels of trust to high levels of trust, two elementary schools and one middle school would be at a point that could be labeled as possessing high trust levels. These APs who reported high levels of trust within their schools described “a culture of collaboration and trust,” reporting that collaboration and

cooperation were simply the way of work. They gave examples of how their teachers supported each other both personally and professionally. On the other end of the trust continuum would be the two high schools with less pervasive levels of trust. These two high school APs indicated that there were some teachers who had a general distrust of anyone in administration and tended to be distrustful of newcomers and teachers outside their own departments. On this hypothetical continuum, there was one outlier – a middle school with toxic levels of distrust. The AP described this school environment this way,

This was the most guarded group of people I've ever encountered in my life...you could not get into that group. You were talked about, you were watched for a mistake to be made. If you were new, you were not given information so you could look like an idiot in front of the group.

Vangen and Huxham (2003) identified elements of a trust building and sustaining cycle. These elements are: (1) shared expectations; (2) managed risk; (3) stability of the group; and (4) power structures. This cyclical trust building loop starts with establishing some level of shared expectation for the outcome of an interaction. Total trust in the other individual or in the process is not necessary to get started. If the group or partnership can agree on a starting point and a next step, the process has begun. For the leader, the next step involves managing the risk or vulnerability of the participants. This involves a leader who is sensitive to what those individual risks might be and who continuously reassesses the level of risk as the stability of the group or situation changes. Finally, the leader must be attuned to the power structures, whether formal or informal, that may threaten the level of trust within the group. The interview protocol used by the researcher followed the Vangen and Huxham (2003) elements of the trust building cycle to examine the

participants' awareness of trust building. Participants were asked directly if their teachers shared a common expectation for student achievement, they were asked if their teachers felt comfortable discussing their instructional practice and student performance with each other, they were asked about the stability of their group, and they were asked to identify the formal and informal leaders in their group and to identify the source of their power (see Appendix E). The researcher then used these elements as a framework to categorize the participants experiences related to trust within their schools.

Shared expectations as the initial stage of the trust building cycle. Lambert, (1998) asserts that teacher commitment to collaboration increases with a common vision for student success and a common vision for continuous professional growth. The participants were asked directly during both interviews, about the degree to which their teachers held shared expectations for student success (see Appendix D & E). Particularly at the secondary level there is great variance in teacher definition of student success as well as great variance in the level of teacher commitment to professional growth. MS1 and HS1 both stated that most of their teachers would say they wanted their students to be successful, but that teachers were not equally successful in getting students to meet those expectations. MS2 explained, "Teacher A may define success as students to walking quietly in a straight line to lunch, while teacher B considers the trip successful if all arrive safely with no fights or arguments." She reported that these varying definitions of success impact levels of trust between teachers. HS2 and MS2 also spoke about teachers who blame the lack of student learning on factors outside of their control. However, the APs reported that some teachers did take on more personal responsibility for student success than others. This was evidenced with statements from the APs such as, "some teachers

are always searching for ways to improve their practice.“ These were the teachers most likely to seek opportunities for reflective dialogue on their practice. “I have one team that is totally self –sufficient. They analyze student data, plan lessons together, brainstorm solutions to problems, and share the leadership within the group, requiring very little support from me” (ES2).

The APs identified shared expectations as a part of the trust building process. At the more collaborative schools this belief was expressed from a positive stance. The APs made statements such as, “We establish a vision at the beginning of the school year, it is our way of work.” At the less collaborative schools this belief was expressed from a negative stance. The APs made statements such as “Our teachers do not share a common vision.”

Managed risk as an element of the trust building cycle. When considering the need to manage risk in order to initiate or sustain trust, the APs stated that many of their teachers were reluctant to participate in professional learning conversations due to the risk of exposure of instructional deficiencies, due to fear of change, and due to fear of judgment or blame (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). The participants were asked if their teachers felt comfortable sharing their instructional practice. In response they made statements such as, “Admitting I can do better is seen as admitting a deficiency...they are afraid to share their results because they are afraid of being blamed.” HS1 explained, “It’s hard to eat crow...for a teacher who has been doing something for 20 years and have become ineffective...they’re very comfortable with what they do.” The APs reported that many teachers they work with were comfortable talking about teaching strategies, but much less comfortable looking closely at student learning. “Sharing teaching

strategies is fine, but looking at the results together...no, they won't do that" ES2.

Looking at student data to determine whether or not a student was learning in a specific teacher's class was "still considered sort of private information" (HS2). There was fear that it would be discovered that their instructional practices were not positively impacting student learning. "You always have some folks who are close to the vest in terms of what they are willing to share" (HS1).

In addition, fear of change could challenge even schools with relatively high levels of trust when the change required was at the personal classroom level (Lambert, 1998). For example, MS1 tells of one teacher's reaction upon learning that every teacher on her team would be required to implement the use of laptops into daily instruction.

When we started talking about how often we were going to use the laptops, she just got up and ran out. We could hear her sobbing in the hallway. It was just so overwhelming for her (MS1).

Allowing oneself to become vulnerable to colleagues requires a level of trust that some schools find difficult to achieve (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). These APs seemed keenly aware of the potential risks their teacher perceived when asked to engage in candid professional learning conversations.

Stability of the group as an element of the trust building cycle. Most APs at each level indicated that trust grows as a result of accumulated positive experiences over time. "They trust me more now than they did when I arrived three years ago" (HS1). In general, these APs expressed a belief that the longer they worked with a group of teachers, as the teachers found them to be trustworthy, the more the teachers trusted them (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). In addition, the more stable

the group of teachers, the more likely they were to support each other. MS1 reported, “We have very little turnover...our teachers will do anything to help each other.” ES1 stated, “we usually hire only people who have interned with us, and so even our new people know our way of work.”

Most, including all high school APs expressed the belief that teachers who work in close proximity to each other build trust. Based on their statements regarding moving teachers classrooms, they believed that when teachers’ classrooms are in close proximity, they are more likely to engage in informal conversations on both personal and professional topics during class changes and during planning time. “We had math teachers all over the building...they had never actually talked to each other” (HS1). All nine saw positive social and professional interactions as indicators of high levels of trust. In the high school setting, these positive social interactions were more likely to occur during shared lunch hours, or in some cases, during happy hour after work on Fridays. “My teachers use their lunch time as their PLC time...if they choose to eat lunch together, that’s a sign that they trust each other” (HS1 & HS3). Three APs, two elementary and one middle, talked about frequent faculty-wide social events. “We get together outside of work all the time...we use any excuse” (MS1). In another example, ES3 told about faculty gatherings where once a month teachers stayed late on a Friday and their families joined them. They brought food and played games together.

However, the stability of the group can also be a detriment to trust with the development of cliques and the reinforcement of the status quo. The APs reported some examples of this with statements such as, “You could not break into that group...they did not trust the math coach because he was not from our school...I think they trust me, but I

am an outsider to this community.” Five of the nine across the levels reported that the teachers with the longest tenure tend to be the most resistant to change.

We have some teachers who have taught for 30 years. They kind of group together and take the attitude that they can say and do whatever they want.

We lost the math department chairperson this year to another school. I think it was because of the negativity (HS3).

While the stability of the group was generally reported to positively impact trust, it was also reported to have a potentially negative impact as well. None of these APs reported high levels of teacher turnover at their schools.

Power structures as elements impacting the trust building cycle. All nine APs expressed an awareness of the influence of power structures and the teachers’ perceptions of hidden agendas on the part of administrators or colleagues as having an impact on levels of trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). They made statements such as, “When I come in as the administrator, they are immediately defensive...I never sit up front in a meeting. I always sit with my teachers...they trust me more than they do the principal.” MS2 reflected, “I think until you get to know me as a person...our conversation will be impeded by my title or position.” They also indicated that informal leaders within teacher teams have the power to influence positively or negatively the discourse of the group. “Teachers rally around the experienced teacher willing to voice concerns” (MS1). When one or more individual assumes control of the conversation, others in the group who hold less power may lose their ability to be heard. This can create distrust (McDonald, et al., 2007; Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

Related to power structures that impact trust is the positional power in the AP and teacher relationship. By virtue of the formal supervisory (positional) title, the AP is in a position to do harm and can therefore be the recipient of suspicion (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2002). One AP described a situation where she was confronted with the fact that the level of trust she thought existed did not. It was the end of the school year and the end of the adoption cycle for a particular subject area. The textbooks were being boxed up for return to the warehouse, but she needed a copy of the book for something she was working on. She went to the closest classroom of a teacher who taught that subject, a teacher with whom the AP thought she had a good rapport. The lights were on in the room and the teacher's belongings were across the room at her desk, but the teacher had stepped out. The AP opened the closet nearest the door and found the book she was looking for. The teacher returned as she was leaving. The AP explained why she was there and what she needed. The next day, the teacher sent an email to the principal and to the plant operator requesting locks for her closet because she had found the AP "pillaging through her stuff." This AP describes feeling shocked at the accusation, "I never in a million years would have thought that she would react that way because of the relationship I thought we had."

The APs were asked to identify the informal leaders within their group and to identify the source of their power (see Appendix D & E). The informal leaders identified by the APs fell into two general descriptions. One group could be described as the "naysayers," the most vocal, opinionated people in the group. Sometimes these were the union representatives, in all cases they were very experienced teachers who raised questions and concerns. ES3 observed, "The least productive people are often the most

vocal. These types of people make collaboration difficult and make the process less enjoyable for other members of the group.”

When asked about the source of power or influence of these informal leaders, most identified their longevity at the school, and the fact that they were willing to voice concerns others may not have the courage to voice. Generally these people were identified as knowledgeable and were perceived as good teachers. “They are respected because they have been at this school since it opened...people trust them to speak for them” (MS2). Several APs shared that while having these people on the team created challenges, they recognized that they served a useful purpose. For example, HS2 talked about a teacher who was perceived by other teachers as being negative. He was known for bringing up contrary points during team discussion, yet, he would go back into his classroom and use the strategies they were discussing successfully with his students. In this way, he influenced other “naysayers” to get on board with the initiative. In another example, MS1 talked about several teachers who held influence because they were men in a female dominated profession. These men would continually raise questions about details that had not been considered. When they did this in a public forum it was intimidating to her as a young female administrator and to other less experienced teachers. In time, she learned to let them voice their concerns and to work with them through the challenges. Several APs stated they were glad to have the naysayers on the team so that they could hear firsthand what the opposition was. “I invited the naysayers, and I’m glad they came” (HS1).

MS3 told of a leadership team that was charged with going back to their respective team members to disseminate information and gather feedback. She started

hearing comments coming back from teachers that were not representative of the message that was to be delivered. When she sat in on a meeting with that team, she realized this individual was spinning every point in the most negative light possible. Furthermore, he was intimidating the rest of the group from speaking out to disagree with him. The AP intervened by interrupting the conversation to ask another teacher who had spoken to her privately what her thoughts were. This gave the teacher the courage to speak out. When this teacher presented her views, others then spoke out as well. The end result was that “naysayer” lost his influence in this group. This AP concluded the scenario by talking about how she then approached this individual privately to bring him back into the group. She said, “You can always find something positive to say to them...it’s my job to make them nicer!” This AP’s sensitivity to how this informal leader was impacting her group and her constructive actions to resolve the problem were consistent with Tschannen-Moran and Hoy’s (2000) charge that those with positional power have the responsibility to build and maintain the trust building cycle.

The naysayer is one type of informal leader identified, the second type was the opposite. These were described as energetic people with positive personalities. These people were identified through comments such as, “You have those people who are always going to step up and go with you 100 percent... teachers follow them because they are good for kids...teachers follow them because they are willing to help...teachers follow them because they know what they are doing.” These teachers were considered well-informed, professional, and liked by their students. Others depended on them to have accurate information and to be willing to help. Their influence was in their ability to energize and motivate others. These individuals assumed leadership roles simply by

recognizing a need and stepping in to fill it (Allix & Gronn, 2005). HS2 explained, “Our math teachers have been the ones who would readily jump on the bandwagon to try new things...they speak their mind, but are also friendly and they share ideas...they are cheerleaders.”

Despite the barriers to trust that may be inherent in the AP and teacher relationship due to positional power, five APs across all levels expressed that they believe that when teachers seek their support or advice on personal or professional concerns it is an indication of trust. “I think my teachers trust me, I know they come to me a lot with problems and concerns” HS3. They understood that asking for assistance might signal an admission of an area of weakness or deficiency. “If you ask somebody else for help...you’ve got to be okay with saying...I trust you” (ES1). This candid admission isn’t likely to occur unless there is trust that the other person will not use the information for harmful purposes (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2000).

This section has examined the APs responses related to research question three regarding their awareness of elements of trust within and surrounding professional learning conversations. In summary, these APs are keenly aware of the impact of trust on the professional learning conversations at their schools. Although a few report high levels of trust as a total school culture, and others report pockets of trust among select individuals, all indicate complex interpersonal relationships that can stifle or enhance collaboration. Table 4 provides a visual summary of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the participants’ responses related research question three.

Table 4

Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Related to Research Question Three Regarding the Assistant Principals' Awareness of the Impact of Elements of Trust or Mistrust on Professional Learning Conversations

<i>Shared expectations</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Commitment to collaboration increases with a common vision	x	x	x	x		x		x	x
Teacher variance in definition of student success		x			x	x	x	x	x
Teacher variance in commitment to professional growth		x			x	x	x		x
<i>Managed risk</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Risk of exposure of deficiencies		x			x	x	x	x	
Fear of change				x	x	x	x		x
Fear of judgment or blame					x	x	x	x	x
<i>Stability of group</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Positive interactions over time	x		x	x	x		x	x	
Proximity of work	x		x		x		x	x	x
Trust as a lubricant for social and professional interaction	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Cliques and status quo		x	x		x		x		x
<i>Power structures</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Hidden agendas	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Informal leaders – loud voices	x	x	x	x	x		x		
Informal leaders – competent, helpful colleagues		x		x				x	x
Teachers seeking support from AP	x		x			x		x	x

Note. The asterisk indicates the participants from schools identified by the regional superintendents as being collaborative. Abbreviations used in this table: elementary school (ES); middle school (MS); and high school (HS).

Research Question Four: How Do These Assistant Principals Perceive Their Role or Influence in Building Trust or Mistrust?

The previous section examined the participants' responses related to research question three regarding their awareness of the elements of the trust building cycle: shared expectations, managed risk, stability of the group, and power structures (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). This next section will examine the participants' responses to research question four related to the APs' perceptions of their role or influence in building trust or mistrust. To do this, the researcher again used Vangen and Huxham's elements of trust as a framework. Participants were asked directly how they build trust between themselves and their teachers and between their teachers (see Appendix E).

Shared expectations as the initial stage of the trust building cycle. The APs identified three actions they could take to develop shared expectations. These were: (1) recognizing and building upon positive contributions and performance; (2) setting and reinforcing a vision of collaboration; (3) and leading with transparency and consistency. The idea of developing shared expectations by recognizing the positive contributions of others is consistent with Kramer's (1999) theory of small-wins. The small-wins approach allows one success to build upon another. "I've learned that the littlest recognitions, even a certificate...which I personally would not value... can make a big difference" (ES2). "You reward them, you recognize them when they do things well, and you are also straight forward with them when you see things that are not going well" (MS2). In addition to recognizing contributions, the APs identified setting and reinforcing the vision for collaboration as a critical step in developing shared expectations, "You have to let them know what the vision is" (MS1). "It is our job to be that visionary who creates a

picture of what it could look like” (ES2). Finally, the APs identified the importance of leading by example with transparency and consistency as critical action in developing shared expectations for building trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). HS2 explains,

As the leader, sometimes it’s the little things like remembering birthdays and saying hello in the hallway. It’s being the same everyday. Not coming in smiling one day and frowning the next. It’s being careful how I talk. Not being a gossiper and downing our school and our programs. I think you build trust by sharing some of yourself with the individual and they share something with you as well (HS2).

The participants developed shared expectations by recognizing positive contributions, by setting the vision for collaboration, and striving to lead with transparency and consistency.

Managed risk as an element of the trust building cycle. The APs identified three critical actions related to managing the risk of their teachers when participating in professional learning conversations. These were: structuring the conversations to limit risk, protecting confidentiality, and setting attainable goals. The most common conversation structure mentioned was the use of collaboratively developed ground rules. Seven out of nine believed that established ground rules and agreed upon norms for behavior were useful and could be referred to if a redirect of the conversation was needed. “We developed the ground rules together at the beginning of the project and referred back to them if needed” (MS1). “They were the basic things like no one dominates the conversation...we treat each other...with respect...begin and end on time...” (ES1). “If we establish the ground rules up front, no one is offended if the facilitator

needs to redirect the conversation” (MS3). Only two of the APs (one middle and one high) saw ground rules as unnecessary when working with adults. “My teachers are professionals, they don’t need ground rules” (MS2). The high school AP who felt ground rules to be unnecessary believed that conversation protocols were probably necessary at the elementary and middle levels but not for high school. “High school teachers tend to be more task oriented and focused than elementary and middle school teachers” (HS1). However, HS2 shared that she had observed a facilitator working with a group of teachers at her school. This facilitator used a very simple strategy to be sure that no one dominated the conversation and that all voices were heard. HS2 saw this as powerful in moving the conversation forward.

In addition to structuring conversations, the middle and high school APs (five of the six), reported the need manage risk by protecting confidentiality. “If any teacher has ever told me something, it doesn’t come back to them from someone else” (HS2). “I am very careful, even with my friends who are teachers not to talk about what is going on with another teacher” (MS2). “People are free to express their opinion during a PLC because they know I won’t talk about them in another setting” (HS1).

Finally, the APs manage potential risk for their teachers by setting attainable goals. MS1 and HS2 talked about the importance of teachers seeing their progress before moving on to the next step.

They could see that we had accomplished all of the goals we had set out the previous year – which is rare – and then when establishing the goals for the following year, we didn’t change them completely. We just added to what we had already done. We took the time to come to a consensus

rather than voting. We decided as a group what we would do, and what would be too much (HS2).

MS1 called these attainable goals “safety nets” for success. “We set up safety nets all along the way. We want them to see that the goal we set is doable” (MS1). For these APs, structured conversations, maintaining confidentiality and setting attainable goals was a way to manage the risk of change, thereby building trust (Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

Stability of the group as an element of the trust building cycle. Vangen and Huxham (2003) assert that changes in group stability, such as personnel changes or new directives, could impact the dynamics of trust within the group. The AP’s recognized that it is their role to adjust their approach based on the stability of the group. This was evidenced in the importance they placed on knowing their group well enough to communicate effectively. “You have to ask questions and listen carefully to find out how they perceive their situation.” (ES3).

When introducing a new idea, you have to get a feel for the comfort level of your people. If you don’t know your people, you’re screwed. They will shut you down right from the start. I usually start out with food and up beat music. When people are eating and having fun, it helps them let their guard down (MS3).

The APs recognized the importance of knowing the strengths, weaknesses, abilities, and mindset of the individuals within the group to frame their message in order to differentiate the support needed.

Power structures as elements impacting the trust building cycle. The AP's recognized their role in trust building by effectively managing the impact of power structures within the group. The actions the APs identified as important were: (1) sharing key information uniformly; (2) mediating interpersonal conflicts objectively; (3) and setting appropriate personal boundaries. Eight of the nine administrators reported their efforts to communicate a consistent message with information that would impact the work of their teachers. When one individual or group is privy to important information and others are not, a power differential is created (Allix & Gronn, 2005). "I make sure that I send important information to my entire team, even if I think not all of them would be involved so that it doesn't look like I am playing favorites" (HS2). In addition to identifying a need to share information uniformly, the APs related stories of mediating interpersonal conflict between staff members. In these stories, they described emotionally complex environments within their buildings. Example comments include, "The teachers on that team just didn't like each other...the younger teachers are intimidated by the older teachers...there was one person that dominated every meeting...they tend to distrust people from other departments." ES3 shared an example of her role in mediating a conflict,

I had two teachers who were in the same department, and in the same grade level who didn't like one another. I talked to them separately, I talked to them together and then I had them talk to one another. We set some ground rules to come up with a common way of work. They agreed to take each other at face value rather than to make assumptions about the other's intentions. When they saw over time that it worked, I think they

started to trust each other more...maybe not like each other, but they didn't have to like each other (ES3).

The APs identified the need to share information uniformly, mediate conflicts and to set appropriate boundaries in their work with teachers. Their examples of setting appropriate boundaries included maintaining objectivity and remaining cognizant of their positional power. ES3 reflected on her mediation described in the previous paragraph and said, "It was important for me not to show favoritism. I couldn't be a voice for one side or the other." MS2 said, "Teachers watch to see if you will address issues with other teachers consistently...if you don't you lose credibility as an administrator...it's a positional thing." Two high school APs specifically mentioned avoiding the after-work happy hour gatherings. "I want them to see me as a role model...I avoid social settings with staff members where alcohol is served." In addition to maintaining objectivity, the APs recognized that as the person with positional power, it was their job to be the person to reach out when conflicts arise (Kramer, 1999). ES3 explained that many times the administrator becomes either the target or the sounding board for teachers' frustrations:

You could take it personally, because they are upset about something that you have done. So I try to be reflective after a situation like that occurs and have a dialogue with them about my thoughts about what they said. It's letting them know that I may not totally agree with what they said, but that I've thought about what they said (ES3).

In the lived experiences of these APs, power differentials that impact trust could be minimized when they shared information uniformly, mediated personal conflicts when

necessary, and maintained appropriate interpersonal boundaries in the administrator teacher relationship.

This section has examined the AP responses related to research question four. In summary, when seeking to understand their perceptions of their role in the trust building cycle, each of them recognized that they are in unique positions to build and sustain trust among their teachers and to influence their teachers' trust in them. Ideas such as maintaining confidentiality and setting appropriate boundaries appeared to be more important or valued at the secondary level where the reported trust levels were not as high. Table 5 provides a visual representation of the participants' responses related to their roles in the trust building cycle.

Table 5

Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Related to Research Question Four Regarding the Assistant Principals' Perception of Their Role or Influence in Building Trust or Mistrust

<i>Shared expectations</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Recognizing and building on the positive	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	
Setting and reinforcing vision of collaboration	x	x	x	x				x	x
Leading with transparency and consistency	x		x		x	x	x	x	x
<i>Managed risk</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Structuring conversations	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	
Protecting confidentiality					x	x	x	x	x
Setting attainable goals	x			x		x		x	
<i>Stability of group</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Know your group and frame your message	x		x	x	x	x		x	
<i>Power structures</i>	*ES1	ES2	ES3	*MS1	*MS2	MS3	*HS1	*HS2	HS3
Share information	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Objectively mediate	x	x	x			x		x	
Set appropriate boundaries					x		x	x	x

Note. The asterisk indicates the participants from schools identified by the regional superintendents as being collaborative. Abbreviations used in this table: elementary school (ES); middle school (MS); and high school (HS).

Concluding Comments

When looking across the typologies used to categorize the qualitative data generated from this study, the following generalizations (Hatch, 2002) emerged:

- APs have considerable influence on the teacher work environment.
- Schools are emotionally and politically complex work environments.
- Trust is a dynamic commodity.
- Informal interactions form the groundwork for professional learning conversations.
- Conversation protocols were not widely used.
- Professional learning conversations for teacher growth were more commonly in practice at the elementary school level.

APs have considerable influence on the teacher work environment. Although they are not the primary authority figure in their schools, these assistant principals believe they have considerable influence upon and responsibility for the teacher work environment. This belief was evidenced in ways they talked about their roles in initiating or facilitating professional learning conversations and building trust between themselves and their teachers and between their teachers. They saw themselves as process managers, as a resource for teachers, as facilitators of professional learning conversations, and as co-learners with teachers. They understood that actions they took could either build or diminish trust and they took personal responsibility for consciously acting in ways that build trust (Avolio, 2004; Tschannen-Moran, 2000).

Schools are emotionally and politically complex work environments. These APs view their schools as emotionally and politically complex work environments where meaningful learning conversations for professional growth are not likely to occur without purposeful design and intervention on the part of administrators (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter & McDonald, 2007). They provided rich examples, both positive and negative, of interpersonal interactions that impact the discourse throughout the school day and beyond. They cited physical, social/emotional and power structures that must be consciously managed in order for professional learning conversations to occur.

Trust is a dynamic commodity. These APs believe that trust; a required element of meaningful professional learning conversations (Bryk & Schneider, 2003), is a dynamic commodity that can be enhanced or diminished directly by the actions of administrators. They recognized the importance of shared expectations, managed risk, the stability of the group and power structures within the group as elements of the trust building cycle (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Several shared specific situations they have encountered that exemplify the fragile nature of trust in the school setting.

Informal interactions form the groundwork for professional learning conversations. From their experiences, it is apparent that informal conversations lay the groundwork for deeper, more structured professional learning conversations. From casual greetings in the hallways, to social interactions during lunch or faculty activities, to the conscious planting of seeds of ideas by administrators (Lambert, 1998), the small informal interactions throughout the day impact the success of more in depth formal learning conversations.

Conversation protocols were not widely used. At the time of this study, there was only emerging knowledge among these assistant principals of how conversation protocols could support professional learning conversations in their schools. One participant in this study admitted,

The conversations we do have are very often reactive, not proactive. We don't take the time, that is, we don't make the time to give teachers the opportunity to dialogue together to build synergy. Teachers don't really know how to do that. Administrators don't really know how to do that. Has someone really taught me how to facilitate a professional learning conversation? No. People assume that we know, but I think that's a misconception (MS2).

Several APs stated they were just learning about conversation protocols, several indicated they had used various protocols sporadically, and several reported that they considered them unnecessary with adult professionals. None of the APs said that they consistently and consciously use protocols when planning to facilitate professional learning conversations. Several expressed a desire to learn more on this topic and indicated a belief that district administrators should model this practice when planning professional development for school-based teachers and administrators. HS2 observed,

We talk about the need for teachers to use the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model of lesson planning, but teachers need us to use it as well. They need a clear explanation, they need a model of what it will look like, and they need an opportunity to try it out while working with other

teachers. They need all of this before we can expect them to do whatever it is we are asking them to do (HS2).

Professional learning conversations for teacher growth were more commonly in practice at the elementary school level. When looking across all of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from their responses, it became apparent that the elementary APs were most likely to connect professional learning conversations with teacher instructional growth. It also is apparent that these types of conversations more regularly occur at the elementary level in the district of this study, and that when they do occur they do so with more structure and focus on teacher growth.

This group of assistant principals, by training, experience and dedication to their jobs represented a high quality administrative work force for their district. Each of them presented thoughtful responses that implied a genuine caring for their teachers and the students they serve. Their definitions of the term “professional learning conversations” were remarkably similar, yet their lived experiences related to professional learning conversations varied greatly. As a group, their responses revealed that they value the professional growth afforded by collaboration both for themselves and for their teachers. In addition, they recognized the elements of building and sustaining trust within their faculty, and how these elements impacted group interactions. Each one acknowledged his or her potential to impact the trust building cycle.

Chapter V

Summary and Discussion

This study sought to discover, document and describe the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes social structures and process related to professional learning conversations from the perspective of nine assistant principals. The conceptual framework for this study was rooted in social constructivist learning theory and distributed leadership organizational theory. Social constructivist learning theory proposes that meaning is constructed as a result of the interaction of the group (Lewin as cited in Gold, 1998; Palinscar, 1998; Sivan, 1986). In a school setting this would mean that when teachers work together collaboratively to solve problems and share dilemmas related to their daily professional experiences, the insights they gain from their shared learning would be greater than without collaboration. Whether the new learning is generated from reflection on ideas presented in a text or traditional training or whether the new learning is generated from reflection on the experiences of others, common lesson planning, or looking at student work, the combined learning of the group is greater than that of an isolated individual. (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lewin as cited in Gold, 1998; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Distributed leadership theory proposes that in every organization, both formal and informal leaders exist, and organizational growth is dependent upon the alignment of the vision and activities of those leaders (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). In a school setting this would mean that the various formal leaders in the school,

such as administrators, department chairpersons, and team leaders share a common vision in the focus of their work, not only with each other but also with the various informal leaders. Informal leaders are those that without formal leadership roles have the ability to influence how others think and act. In order for individuals to learn from each other, and to share leadership roles with planned alignment, a foundation of trust must exist (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk 1994; Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998). Trust allows the collaborative learners, and the formal and informal leaders to believe that the others in the group will not undermine the wellbeing of their fellow participants or the organization. (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). These three concepts, social constructivist learning theory, distributed leadership theory and a foundation of trust weave together to support professional learning conversations. When educators participate in focused, reflective dialogue regarding their work, examining their practice and student outcomes, organizational leadership and instructional capacity is increased (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk 1994; Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998).

Assistant principals are on the front line of the implementation of school-wide processes as they interact daily with teachers. They typically conduct teacher evaluations, help plan and deliver professional development and mediate teacher, student, and parent concerns (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). For many teachers, assistant principals become the face of administration for the school and district (Lipsky, 1980). How these key individuals perceive the value and process of professional learning conversations will likely impact the extent to which they occur and the impact they might have on building teaching capacity (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

The nine APs in this study had from three to eleven years experience as assistant principals and a variety of experiences in the field of education. All of them had either completed their district's principal certification program or were currently enrolled. They willingly volunteered their time to be a part of this study during the summer of 2010, which indicated some level of motivation and commitment toward their profession. As a group they were experienced, dedicated and likely to represent the best level of knowledge and practice regarding professional learning conversations for building teaching capacity in their district.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are limited to the attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives of the nine assistant principals who participated. However, their lived experiences in many ways corroborate the findings of the vast amount of literature on the topic of professional learning conversations, distributed leadership and trust. The findings of this study indicate that professional learning conversations for teacher growth were more prevalent at the elementary school level, that trust may be more difficult to cultivate at the middle and high schools, and that protocols as structures for facilitating conversations and building trust were not widely in use.

Research question one: What are the attitudes and beliefs of these assistant principals regarding professional learning conversations as structures to support professional growth? These APs indicated a belief that meaningful professional learning conversations occur within a wider context of relationship (trust) and knowledge and are cultivated through a series of informal conversations. This concept relates to what Lambert (1998) refers to as feedback loops. In Lambert's model, administrators

purposefully conduct individual conversations to introduce new ideas. One of the APs used the analogy of *seed planting* to express this process. The feedback loop process allows people time to think about new information and formulate questions before responding in a larger group setting. This is a process by which administrators can share the power of knowledge and thereby build trust. When people first encounter a new idea, often the reaction is resistance (Lambert, 1998). Informal conversations allow time and space for people to work through their initial reactions. In addition to this sharing of information, the APs recognized the power of informal conversations shared briefly in the hallways or parking lot to set the stage for more formal discussions. Personal greetings and expressions of concern can serve to establish positive connections that can facilitate formal learning conversations. This concept is supported by Vangen and Huxham's (2003) assertion that trust is primarily built in response to a series of successful interactions.

Professional learning conversations for teacher growth were more commonly in practice at the elementary school level. All three elementary APs described professional learning conversations that took place within on going structured PLC time at their schools. None of the middle and high school APs referred to this type of consistent, systemic structure. The conversations described by the middle and high school assistant principals were episodic, occurring to accomplish a specific task. All three elementary APs connected the incidents they shared back to teacher professional growth and changed instructional practice, while only one middle and one high school AP made this connection.

While the APs defined the term “professional learning conversations” in remarkably similar ways, the examples each gave varied widely. The elementary APs were more likely to view professional learning conversations as a unique form of professional development, but the secondary APs tended to see professional learning conversations as a means to accomplish necessary school tasks rather than for professional growth. They all indicated that administrators (either themselves specifically or other administrators they know) need more training and modeling from their principals and district administrators on how to facilitate professional learning conversations for building teaching capacity.

Research question two: How do these assistant principals perceive their role in initiating or facilitating learning conversations? These APs appeared to believe that they have considerable influence on the teacher work environment. A foundational premise of this study was that assistant principals were key gatekeepers in the implementation and facilitation of professional learning conversations at their schools. In fact, each of the nine APs who participated in this study revealed by their stories and reflections that they saw themselves as directly involved in the day-to-day work environments of the teachers they were assigned to supervise and to some degree in the school at large. They each described operational processes that they influenced or controlled, exercising autonomy, that would impact directly or indirectly professional learning conversations at their schools. These processes included planning meetings, setting agendas and timelines, framing tasks, mediating interpersonal conflicts, determining room assignments, completing teacher evaluations, implementing school-wide initiatives and developing master schedules (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Although they were not the primary

authority figure in their schools, these assistant principals believed they had influence upon and responsibility for the teacher work environment. Not one of the APs expressed a sense of helplessness or hopelessness in their ability to positively impact the work environment of their teachers. Ingersoll (2001) asserts that “schools are not simply victims of large-scale, inexorable demographic trends...there is a significant role for the management of schools in both the genesis and solution of school staffing problems.” The expressed attitudes and beliefs of these APs would support this claim.

These APs described their schools as emotionally and politically complex work environments where individual personalities and human interactions created an ever-changing kaleidoscope of perspectives to be navigated (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Lambert, 1998; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter & McDonald, 2007; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Their responses supported the theory of distributed leadership (Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon & Yashkima, 2007) and the need for formal leaders, those with positional power and titles, to actively work to create a planned alignment of vision and action for the various informal leaders in the school. Their responses also supported Spillane, Halverson and Diamond’s (2004) assertion that there is interdependence and a negotiated order within any leader and follower relationship. The followers influence the behavior and attitudes of the leader. Furthermore, each of the APs recognized the organic nature of informal leadership, understanding that informal leaders arise in all organizations (Allix & Gronn, 2005). They accepted this phenomenon as natural and something to be cultivated. In their descriptions of the informal leaders in their individual schools, they recognized the divisive potential of the misalignment of leadership, whether spontaneous or planned (Leithwood, et al., 2007), and accepted the

responsibility to successfully negotiate an alignment of vision within the various factions of their work setting. The emotional and political complexity of their work environments indicated that meaningful learning conversations for professional growth are not likely to occur without purposeful design and intervention on the part of those in formal leadership roles (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998; Leithwood, et al., 2007; Lewin as cited in Gold, 1998; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter & McDonald, 2007).

However, conversation protocols were not widely used. Even among the APs most attuned to professional learning conversations as vehicles professional development, only one elementary AP described a protocol other than established ground rules. Several indicated that they were just learning about how conversation protocols might facilitate the learning process, and several APs indicated that they were not sure how to facilitate a learning conversation. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter and McDonald (2007) assert that using protocols helps make conversations more productive by ensuring that all voices are heard and that the conversation moves forward. Gold (1998) summarized Kurt Lewin's viewpoint that group discussions may be helpful, but group decisions are what change behavior. In addition, democratic groups require leadership and structure to function (Gold, 1998). The National School Reform Faculty (2010) organization believes "professional development for educators best takes place in learning communities and extended networks, using proven structures and practices," and that these communities must be led by skilled facilitative leaders. However, at the time of this study, there was only emerging knowledge among these assistant principals of how conversation protocols could support professional learning conversations in their schools.

Research question three: How do these assistant principals identify elements of trust or mistrust within the critical incident described? These APs recognized that trust levels increase or decrease based on the actions, attitudes, and perceptions of the members of the school community. Consistent with the experience of these APs, trust has been called the lubricant that facilitates reflective discourse, social processes, and collective efficacy of a school faculty (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Several of the APs indicated that their schools enjoyed a culture of trust and collaboration, while others described only pockets of trust within their faculties. Only one described a pervasive culture of distrust. As they described the personal interactions of the various members of their staff, whether describing high or low levels of trust, their descriptions included examples of Vangen and Huxham's (2003) elements of trust; shared expectations, managed risk, group stability, and power structures. They spoke about the importance of leaders creating a culture of collaboration by establishing a common vision and of the importance of the team members sharing expectations for the functioning of the group and for the outcome of their work together. They recognized that opening a dialogue about instructional practice and student outcomes created a sense of risk for many of their teachers. They identified the impact of group stability upon the dynamics of the group. While generally, the more stable the group, the greater the trust, they also provided examples of ways that long-term group members diminish the openness to change. The impact of power structures, the fourth element of the trust building cycle, was evident as they acknowledged the power of informal leaders to influence the thinking of the group and how their roles as supervisors (positional power) could potentially create barriers to trust.

Research question four: How do these assistant principals perceive their role or influence in building trust or mistrust? These APs indicated a nuanced sensitivity to the impact of trust within their buildings. Each of them identified personal actions they could take to increase their teachers' the level of trust both in them as administrators and between their teachers. These actions, which support Vangen and Huxham's (2003) trust building cycle, included developing realistic common expectations, recognizing and managing the vulnerabilities of the participants, managing the changing dynamics of the group stability, and managing power imbalances. The APs indicated a belief that trust, a required element of meaningful professional learning conversations is a dynamic commodity that can be enhanced or diminished directly by the actions of administrators. This finding is not surprising given the existing related literature (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk 1994; Fullan, 2008a; Glickman, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lambert, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Each of them recognized that they are in unique positions to build and sustain trust among their teachers and to influence their teachers' trust in them. Ideas such as maintaining confidentiality and setting appropriate boundaries appeared to be more important or valued at the secondary level where the reported trust levels were not as high.

Limitations of Study

This qualitative study focused on the attitudes, perceptions, and lived experiences of nine assistant principals and relevant literature on the phenomenon of professional learning conversations in schools. While there is great value in listening to active practitioners through their written descriptions of critical incidents (Flannigan, 1954; Tripp, 1993) and in depth interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Johnson, 2002), there are

also limitations. One limitation is that the findings are self reported from the perspective of these individuals and may or may not reflect what is actually happening in their schools. In addition, one must consider that fact that all of the participants in this study worked within the same large school district, which opens the possibility that the practices within this district are unique from others elsewhere. Another limitation is that the principal or teachers within these buildings would likely have different perceptions of the phenomenon of professional learning conversations or levels of trust within the schools from their own experiences. Considering these limitations, the findings must be taken for what they are, the perceptions of these individuals, and cannot necessarily be generalized to a greater population. However, the insights provided by these participants are generally supported by other research on this phenomenon.

In retrospect, if conducting this study again, the researcher would tighten the focus of the research questions and interview protocols. Through the data analysis portion of this study, the need for a tighter focus on specific aspects of professional learning communities became apparent to the researcher. The first two research questions were very open-ended and accommodated a wide variety of responses. While this open-ended approach is common in qualitative research, the data analysis process becomes more inductive (Hatch, 2002). The last two research questions, focused specifically on the impact of trust, using Vangen and Huxham's (2003) trust building cycle as a framework. The interview protocols related to trust was structured based on this framework (see Appendix D and E). This framework gave the data more shape during the analysis process. Additionally, the interview protocols used may have included too much overlap

in content. While this did create the intended advantage of more detailed responses from the second interview, the redundancy may have limited the data received.

Implications for Practice

Soon national and state standards for student learning will require that all students from kindergarten through high school are required to demonstrate proficiency in collaborative learning. The *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (June, 2010) which have been adopted by many states, including the state of this study, set standards for speaking and listening starting with what children should know and be able to do in order to be college and career ready. The following excerpt defines the expectation for a *sixth grade* student who is on track for success in college and a future career.

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- a. Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.
- b. Follow rules for collegial discussions, set specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.
- c. Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

- d. Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing (SL.6.1).

It might prove an insightful exercise to ask educators at all levels to compare their most recent professional interactions according to the standards set for sixth grade students. If the vast amount of literature on adult learning, distributed leadership and trust within schools is not compelling enough reason to break down the norm of isolation within schools and replace it with a norm of collaboration and learning, certainly the standard cited above should give pause for thought. How will the adults who are charged with preparing students for college and career readiness accomplish this task if they themselves have not become proficient at engaging in professional learning conversations?

While state Differentiated Accountability (Florida Department of Education: Bureau of School Improvement, 2010) documents mandate such things as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), common planning, and Lesson Study as forms of teacher professional development, the findings from this study show there is wide variance at the school level for how, when and why professional learning conversations occur. These findings raise important questions for further research, guidance for professional development, implications for state and district policy makers, and reflective practice on the part of school and district leaders.

Future researchers may want to explore such questions as: How do the perceptions of these assistant principals differ from those of teachers, principals, or district leaders? What might explain the apparent differences in the various school levels for implementation of professional learning conversations? What is the evidence of the

various forms of professional learning conversations among adult educators impacting student achievement levels? Is there a particular form or structure of professional learning conversation that is more effective than another?

Assistant principals, principals, district administrators and policy makers would benefit from engaging in reflective questioning and problem solving analysis to determine the appropriate next steps for implementing professional learning conversation. In keeping with the spirit of learning conversations for professional growth, this reflection would be most productive as discourse with fellow educators. Questions to consider:

- Are the teachers and administrators at our school(s) participating in learning conversations that are resulting in professional growth?
- If not, why not?
 - Is there a shared vision and established expectation for collaboration?
 - Are there gaps in knowledge and expertise related to facilitating professional learning conversations?
 - Does the teacher work schedule provide time for teachers to work together?
 - Is there a sufficient level of trust among our faculty to initiate professional learning conversations?
- How do we strengthen the articulation of knowledge and practice across elementary, middle and high school levels?
- How do we help all educators better connect the cause and effect relationship between teaching and learning?

Working together to seek answers to these questions will require reflection on both current practices and desired practices. Engaging in this reflective practice is at the heart of learning conversations for professional growth. Asking these types of questions will assist the reflective practitioner to begin to identify the gaps between theory and practice related to professional learning conversations in schools.

Assistant Principals would benefit from further professional development and focus on the art and craft of facilitating professional learning conversations. The APs in this study all indicated that either they or their colleagues needed more direct training modeling of how to bring teachers together to learn from each other and to build teaching capacity. While the elementary APs also indicated room for continued growth, secondary schools in particular would benefit from a strengthened articulation of knowledge and practice related to professional learning conversations across elementary, middle and high schools.

Concluding Comments

While the APs in this study presented a generally upbeat view of their school work environments and professed a general awareness of the potential for professional learning conversations to support the building of teaching capacity in their schools, each of them acknowledged the emotional and structural complexities that impact their work and the work of their teachers. There is political pressure from both the national and state levels like never before to hold teachers “accountable” for the learning gains of their students. This is evidenced by proposals states are making in response to the federal Race To The Top grant that mandates that teachers’ pay be tied to student learning gains (Wise, 2011). While pundits quote studies regarding the importance of teacher quality,

much of what happens in a school setting is outside of the control of the classroom teacher (Ingersoll, 2001).

There is wide agreement in both literature and the professed perspectives of the participants in this study regarding the value of professional learning conversations to positively impact teacher instructional practice. However, there is wide variance in the actual implementation at the school level. Tangible structures such as room assignments and common planning time impact this implementation. However, possibly more importantly, less tangible structures such as shared expectations, managed risk, group stability and power structures may have an even greater impact upon the implementation. The emotional complexities of the work place and the norm of isolation dictate a need for structured engagement opportunities to build the trust that becomes the lubricant for collaboration. Assistant Principals and other district and school based administrators have both the opportunity and the responsibility to create an aligned distributed leadership foundation and build trust. Administrators must touch the hearts and minds of the individuals on the front line of the work – the teachers in the classrooms working with students – because without teacher confidence, hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy, no amount of financial incentive, cajoling, or sanction will improve student learning.

“[People are looking for] daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying” (Terkel, 1972).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Invitation to Participate

Dear Prospective Participant (Insert Name):

I am conducting a study of professional learning conversations. I believe that you are especially well qualified to tell me about the role of professional learning conversations in a school.

I know you are heading out for summer vacation soon, but it would be very helpful if you would agree to talk with me on this topic. I estimate that the project would take about three hours of your time over the course of the next two. Specifically, the project would involve a written response from you (please see the attached questions), two face to face interviews approximately a month apart, and finally, time as you desire to review the interview transcripts to provide further clarification or response. The interviews can be scheduled at a time and location of your convenience, including at your school site.

I will not use your name or the name of your school, and you will have the opportunity to read the interview transcripts and to provide corrections or clarifications. My purpose will be to accurately reflect your experience and thoughts. I believe this information will provide insight into the current reality of professional learning conversations in schools in our district and suggest direction for future research, organizational structure, and professional development in this area.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please respond to this email. I would like to have your written response to the attached questions within the next two weeks. Thanks so much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Appendix B

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study **IRB Study # Pro00001049**

Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) study many topics. To do this, we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. This form tells you about this research study.

We are asking you to take part in a research study that is called: Assistant Principals' Perspectives on Professional Learning Conversations for Teacher Professional Growth

The person who is in charge of this research study is Connie Kolosey. This person is called the Principal Investigator.

The research will be done at a location and time convenient to you.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to discover how a several assistant principals perceive and value professional learning conversations related their self-efficacy to initiate and facilitate teacher collaboration. As an experienced assistant principal I believe that you are especially well qualified to tell me about the role of professional learning conversations in a school.

This study is being conducted as a dissertation which will be submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies College of Education University of South Florida.

Study Procedures

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to

- Write a response to several questions describing a specific professional learning conversation in which you have participated, observed or facilitated. The estimated time for this is 30 to 60 minutes depending upon the length of your response.
- Meet with Connie Kolosey twice for approximately one hour each time approximately one month apart to talk about your experiences and perspectives regarding professional learning conversations. These meetings will take place a time and location convenient to you.

- If you desire, take time to review the transcript after each conversation and provide further clarification or response.

Alternatives

You have the alternative to choose not to participate in this research study.

Benefits

We don't know if you will get any benefits by taking part in this study.

Risks or Discomfort

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation

We will not pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study

Conflict of Interest Statement

The Principal Investigator in this study is employed as a curriculum supervisor in your district, however, has no supervisory responsibility related to you.

Confidentiality

We must keep your study records as confidential as possible.

- Strict confidentiality will be maintained by the Principal Investigator concerning your identity and the information you share.
- To ensure the accuracy of the reported data, the conversations will be recorded; however, neither your name nor the name of your school will be recorded.
- These recordings will be used only for data analysis of the information received.
- The recordings will be stored digitally on a password protected computer hard drive.
- The recordings will be maintained for three years and will then be permanently deleted.

However, certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- The Principal Investigator
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.) These include:

- The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Other individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight may also need to look at your records.
- The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study, to please the investigator or the research staff. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study

Questions, concerns, or complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Connie Kolosey at (727) 215-4374.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-9343.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study.

Appendix C

Critical Incident Written Response Questions

1. When you hear the term “professional learning conversation,” how would you define it?
2. In a few words, how would summarize the general aim of professional learning conversations.
3. Think of a time when you facilitated or participated in a professional learning conversation among teachers that was particularly effective or particularly ineffective.
 - What were the general circumstances leading up to this event?
 - What was the structure of the interaction
 - How many participants?
 - Where did it take place?
 - How long did it last?
 - Who organized/facilitated the event?
 - What evidence of trust or mistrust can you identify?
 - Did this event result in improved classroom instruction for one or more of the participants? How do you know?

Appendix D

First Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about your career in education.
 - a. How long did you teach?
 - b. What subject and grade?
 - c. How long have you been an AP and at what levels?
 - d. How long have you been in your current position?
2. Why did you pursue a career in administration?
3. What were the key experiences that prepared you for your role as an assistant principal?
4. What are your career aspirations at this point?
5. If seeking a principalship, what experiences as an assistant principal have prepared you for that next step?
6. Think of a principal that you have worked with in the past who has served as a role model for you. What are some characteristics of that person you would like to emulate?
7. I would like to talk with you more about the professional learning conversation you wrote about.
 - a. What was the context and structure of the conversation? (Probe: time, place, duration, purpose)
 - b. What was your role in the conversation? (Probe: observer, participant, facilitator, presenter, initiator?)

- c. What data sources, if any, were used to guide the discussion? (Probe: standardized test scores, progress monitoring data, discipline data, attendance data, survey data, etc.)
- d. Were there any protocols? (Probe: conversation structures, ground rules, graphic organizers, etc. used)
- e. Was the conversation focused on teacher growth? (Probe: If yes, how so? If no, or not sure, what might be done in future conversations to create more focus on teacher growth?)
- f. Was there any evidence of the conversation having an impact on teacher growth? (Probe: If so, what evidence? If not, what could have been changed to make the professional learning conversations more effective?)
- g. Did the group have a shared purpose for the outcome of the conversation? (Probe: If so, what were they? Were they met? If not, did this impact the results of the conversation? How?) (Trust factor: shared expectations)
- h. Did the participants feel safe sharing openly in this group? (Probe: Why or why not? How do you know?) (Trust factor: managed risk)
- i. Did everyone present contribute to the discussion? If not, why not? (Trust factor: managed risk)
- j. Did any one person dominate the conversation? (Probe: If so, what impact did this have? If not, what prevented this...established group norms? politeness? mutual respect?) (Trust factor: managed risk)

- k. How long have the people in this group worked together? (Trust factor: stability of the group)
- l. How often do they meet? (Probe: Is that often enough? Why or why not?)
(Trust factor: stability of the group)
- m. Who are the formal and informal leaders in this group? (Probe: Which individuals hold formal leadership titles? Which individuals are most respected by the group? (Trust factor: power structures)
- n. What is the source of these leaders influence or power? (Probe: longevity? personality? knowledge or experience? (Trust factor: power structures)

Appendix E

Second Interview Protocol

1. Last time we spoke you described a specific teacher professional learning conversation you had observed or facilitated. Have you had any further thoughts about our conversation that you would like to share?
2. In our last conversation, you defined professional learning conversations as.... Today, I'm going to ask a few more questions about your perspective and experiences with teacher learning conversations. For the sake of this discussion, I am defining professional learning conversations as any conversation between educators that is focused on improved instructional practice and student achievement.
3. What training or experiences have prepared you for your work with teachers in building instructional capacity? (Probe for further explanation of response.)
4. To what extent are you comfortable in initiating or facilitating learning conversations? (Probe for further explanation of response.)
5. What opportunities do you have to initiate or facilitate learning conversations? (Probe for further explanation of response.)
6. What barriers you have experienced in initiating or facilitating learning conversations? (Probe for further explanation of response.)
7. Do the teachers you work with share common expectations for student achievement? (Probe: How do you know? If unsure, how would you know if they did?) (Trust factor: shared expectations)

8. Do the teachers you work with feel comfortable discussing their instructional practice and student performance with each other? (Probe: How do you know? If unsure, how would you know if they did?) (Trust factor: risk management)
9. How well do the teachers you work with know each other? (Probe: How long have the majority of them worked together in this group or at the school? How often do they interact professionally? In what context? Do they interact socially?) (Trust factor: group stability)
10. Who are the leaders within your group of teachers? (Probe: Who are the individuals that others listen to and follow? What gives them this influence? How do these individuals impact professional learning conversations in your school?) (Trust factor: power structures)
11. How would you describe the trust that exists between you and your teachers? (Probe: Do they trust you? How do you know?)
12. How do you build trust between you and your teachers? (Trust building: self-efficacy)
13. How would you describe the trust between your teachers? (Probe: Do they trust each other? How do you know?)
14. What actions, organizational structures, or administrator behaviors build trust among your teachers? (Trust building: self-efficacy)
15. What support training or resources would be helpful to you or your teachers in implementing professional learning conversations? (Trust building: self-efficacy)

16. As you think about next school year, what could be done to improve the quality of teacher professional learning conversations at your school? (Trust building: self-efficacy)

17. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?