



# Narratives of Trust, Accountability and Professional Autonomy

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## Background Literature/ Context

Over the past two decades, there have been frequent calls for schools to develop trust building practices (Fullan 2003, Tschannen-Moran 2014). The idea that high-trust institutions have positive effects on a range of educational outcomes is relatively uncontested and frequently cited (Bryk and Schneider 2003). This desire to emphasise the importance of trust in the future development of education, sits within a wider critique of a civic and social landscape that is increasingly being defined by low-trust social bonds (Uslaner, 2002; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

Yet the fact that the case for high-trust institutions is still being made is instructive. It seems as if *arguing* for high-trust cultures is not enough, on its own, to transform conditions within schools. Perhaps it is not that an audience of professionals needs to be persuaded of the power of trust, but rather, other factors are acting to perpetuate low levels of trust within schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Indeed, it is precisely *because* trust continues to be perceived as an endangered commodity within schools, that calls for school leaders to develop trust proliferate and intensify (Browning, 2014). In this context, this study set out to explore the lived perceptions of trust within a wider network of institutional factors and pressures.

## Ethics

The main ethical concern in this study was the need to preserve the anonymity of participants whilst still representing their narratives in rich detail. This difficulty is exacerbated by the way that narrative inquiry prioritises, in the first instance, the recording and analysis of the singular, idiosyncratic retelling of experience (Elliott, 2005). Without fidelity and detail here, inquiry is in danger of becoming an over-abstracted summary.

Ultimately, however, maintaining anonymity and confidentiality were the overriding concerns here, especially since the research took place in the relatively closely interwoven geographical context of South Wales. Inevitably, some narrative details *could not* be anonymized, and had to be erased.

The study also took account of the notion of 'relational' care towards participants, ensuring that potential vulnerabilities arising from the discussion of these issues were openly acknowledged and minimized (Clandinin, 2016).

## Methods

A narrative inquiry approach was used (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) to explore the rich detail of the teachers' experiences. Purposeful sampling generated twelve participants across four different secondary settings and a loosely structured interview structure was used to allow the participants to develop the narrative details that were important to them. Each narrative was analysed as a separate unit to maintain an understanding of the distinctive ways in which each participant represented trust, accountability and autonomy. 'Resonant threads' running through the narratives were collected and re-presented.

My own narrative, as an ex-senior leader in secondary schools, was acknowledged and incorporated.

## Results

The participants' narratives explored a set of anxieties. These anxieties centred on their feelings about professional self-worth. The following narrative threads, expressing these anxieties, emerged from the data:

- momentary lapses in positive validation by senior management were accorded increased significance;
- some participants looked to strong school-based structures, processes and systems to safeguard feelings of professional worth;
- professional autonomy was viewed with suspicion by some, as it appeared to open up a space for criticism from peers and management;
- participants worried about the assumption that they had complete control over the results of their pupils;
- undifferentiated monitoring procedures were interpreted as an ever-present threat to the security of the professional self;
- participants preferred to view accountability pressures as the reflex of a de-personalised 'system', rather than as the specific, chosen practices of their management team, since this view reduced the perceived risk of these pressures undermining their own professional status;
- suspicions about the capabilities of others proliferated, as participants looked to reassure themselves that others were more at risk, in terms of safeguarding the professional self, than they were.



## Discussion

The findings suggest that trust is a scarce commodity within schools, and that this perceived scarcity leads teachers to engage in three, protracted domains of self-interrogation. 'In a low-trust environment', they ask themselves, 'how will my professional worth be valued by others?' 'Will I have to work harder to demonstrate my professional worth?' 'How will I gain promotion, or even maintain my professional position?' These questions find their expression in the narrative threads listed to the left.

## Conclusions

In effect, institutional narratives that prioritise frequent monitoring as a core leadership activity may be in danger of normalizing low-trust cultures, and therefore encouraging these anxieties to develop.

The next step, currently in progress, is to compare these teachers' narratives with the perceptions of heads and challenge advisers, professionals who have a key role to play in cultural 'scene-setting' within Welsh education.

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