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CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT AS A MEANS TO PROMOTE INDIVIDUAL GROWTH AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT AS A MEANS TO PROMOTE INDIVIDUAL
GROWTH AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT AS A MEANS TO PROMOTE INDIVIDUAL
GROWTH AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

School staff are continuously asked to adapt to changes that are set forth by various governmental and community agencies. These changes are set in motion to improve schools, however, with change brings conflict. Organizational learning has gained attention as a way to adjust to change. Because conflict can be a taxing, disruptive occurrence in organizations, the purpose of this study was to examine how leaders of schools with high teacher empowerment levels use conflict as a positive force to move their schools forward, despite constant change. Research suggests a connection between organizational learning and teacher empowerment. Additional research was necessary to explore this link.

This study described and analyzed how school leaders use conflict constructively to promote individual growth and organizational learning. Review of district Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Kentucky survey data informed the selection of six schools which evidenced high teacher empowerment. Data were collected through individual interviews with principals, an online teacher survey, as well as focus group interviews with teachers to gain their perspectives about how their school leaders manage conflict.

Analysis of data identified themes for how teacher empowerment and organizational learning are connected, and perceptions of conflict. The findings suggest that a risk-safe environment is essential for ensuring that conflict can be a constructive force in schools. Conflict is also affected by the level teacher leadership, engagement and decision-making. Constructive conflict is evidenced in school that have high levels

of trust among school staff. Schools leaders can use constructive conflict to promote individual growth and organizational learning.

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June 15, 2017
Date

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT AS A MEANS TO PROMOTE INDIVIDUAL
GROWTH AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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This dissertation is dedicated to my children, Gage, Parker and Brooke.

Always remember, you are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, smarter than you think, and loved more than you know.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Within school systems, change is almost constant. Curricular standards and programs of study are replaced, policies are revised to meet new mandates, and staff members at all levels continually enter and exit, thus bringing about variances in the way the school system functions (Collinson & Cook, 2006). Over the past 40 years, the concept of organizational learning has attracted attention as a way to enhance adoption of change (Cangelosi & Dill, 1965; March & Simon, 1958). Organizational learning is defined as "the deliberate use of individual, group, and system learning to embed new thinking and practices that continuously renew and transform the organization in ways that support shared aims" (Collinson & Cook, p. 8). Organizational learning is needed in P12 schools because in circumstances of swift change, only those that are flexible, adaptive, and productive will do extremely well (Senge, 1990).

In order for organizational learning to be successful in school systems, Collinson and Cook (2006) have identified six conditions that must be addressed: (a) *prioritizing learning for all members*, (b) *fostering inquiry*, (c) *facilitating the sharing knowledge*, (d) *practicing democratic principles*, (e) *attending to human relationships*, and (f) *providing for member's self-fulfillment* (p. 60). Three of these conditions were selected to frame this study about using constructive conflict to support organizational learning in schools: practicing democratic principles, fostering inquiry, and attending to human relationships.

Practicing democratic principles is important for organizational learning because "without freedom to inquire (e.g., access information), think independently (e.g., question and critique), and speak as equals (e.g. dissent without fear of retribution), organizational

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learning is severely limited" (Collinson & Cook, 2006, p. 129). Within schools, democratic principles are evident in dispersed leadership, teacher empowerment, and collaboration, and professional learning communities. Members become equals by obtaining knowledge through organizational learning (Dixon, 1999). Table 1.1 compares organizational ways of the past with organizations that practice democratic principles through organizational learning.

Table 1.1 Democratic Principles: A Way of Thinking

From	To
• Leadership and authority (control) reside in formalized titular positions	• Leadership is shared and flexible; • adults converse as equals
• Dependency is fostered (intentionally or unintentionally)	• Interdependence occurs naturally
• Decisions flow from the top down	• Widespread input and transparency of decision making are encouraged
• Conformity and compliance are expected	• Tolerance and independent thinking are valued
• People who question and critique are considered troublemakers	• The organization promotes a vigorous tradition of questioning and debate
• There is a feeling that too much employee knowledge is dangerous	• There is a sense that knowledge benefits everyone
• Employees rely on leaders to solve problems	• Members are responsible for generating possible solutions
• Leaders are blamed when things don't go well	• Leaders and members work together toward continuous improvement
• Individual responsibility prevails	• Collective responsibility is prevalent

Note. Democratic principles: A way of thinking. Adapted from *Organizational Learning: Improving Learning, Teaching, and Leading in School Systems* (Collinson & Cook, 2006, p. 73).

Because practicing democratic principles requires members to be independent thinkers who have a role in the success of the organization, teacher empowerment is a necessary component of organizational learning. "Since the intersection of teacher

empowerment and the capacity for organizational learning is a central thrust for future school reform" (Marks & Louis, 1999, p. 708), the connection between school organizational capacity and teacher empowerment has been supported (Levin, 1991; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994). A school community that appreciates teachers' work and empowers teachers is important (Silins & Mulford, 2004). Confirmation of the connection between organizational capacity and teacher empowerment has appeared in educational research, ranging from the necessary school conditions for functional empowerment to the prime school conditions where democratic organizations can support teaching staffs in becoming professional communities (Levin, 1991; Marks & Louis, 1999; Robertson, Wohlstetter, & Mohrman, 1995). Research focused on organizational learning in schools is necessary to assess the potential for continuing success. An investigation focused on schools with high levels of teacher empowerment is warranted.

The conditions of organizational learning recommended by Collinson and Cook (2006) also include fostering inquiry and attending to human relationships. *Fostering inquiry* is described as encouraging organizational members to identify and fix mistakes and to access ideas and perceptions from others in order to inspire improvements. *Attending to human relationships* is important because any discussion of organizational learning is pointless "without talking about the social system that makes it possible" (Garner & Clement, 1963, p. 86). Within schools, human-relationship skills such as collaboration and communication with peers are required.

Although fostering inquiry and attending to human relationships are necessary for organizational learning, the interactions and collaboration that result from these

conditions inevitably generates controversy due to differing perceptions and ideas. The task for organizational leaders is to create a climate where individuals have the freedom to express their ideas in a risk-safe environment and collaboratively determine a solution that benefits everyone. Therein lies the difference in destructive and constructive conflict. The variance in the two types of conflict is that individuals in a constructive-conflict situation use their anger to solve problems, rather than plan revenge; innovation replaces self-righteous close-mindedness (Uline et al., 2003).

A study by Snyder (1996) indicated a relationship between teacher empowerment, conflict, and commitment. When a high level of conflict was perceived by the teachers, there was a low level of teacher empowerment, but when there was high teacher commitment, there was a high level of teacher empowerment. Conversely, when there was a low level of conflict, there was a high level of teacher empowerment. Thus, a low level of commitment was associated with a low level of empowerment. Snyder's study suggested that principal utilization of cooperative-conflict resolution strategies may improve school climate as measured by levels of conflict and commitment. It also suggested that when teachers are empowered, lower levels of conflict and higher levels of commitment emerge.

Managing conflict and developing commitment in organizations is equally as important because how leaders address these actions determines the success of organizational goal achievement (Lowery, 1993). Because conflict can be a taxing and disruptive occurrence in organizations, the purpose of this study was to examine how leaders of schools with high teacher-empowerment levels use conflict as a positive force to move their schools forward. This study is significant because it (a) surveys teachers in

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schools with high teacher empowerment to determine how conflict is handled in their schools, (b) seeks to reveal techniques for using conflict as a constructive rather than destructive force, and (c) identifies ways to use constructive conflict to assist the school with individual learning and organizational growth.

Research Questions

The overarching question for this study was, *How is conflict used constructively for promoting individual growth and organizational learning in schools within a Kentucky school district where a risk-safe environment exists and where teacher empowerment is high?* The four guiding questions listed below assured that the research question was answered.

1. How do schools address conflict?

2. To what extent is consensus the ultimate goal when conflict arises within a school?

3. In what ways do schools use conflict to support problem solving?

4. In what ways do schools consider conflict in regards to interpersonal relationships?

Methodology

In order to explore how conflict is used constructively for promoting individual growth and organizational learning, a five-phase case study design was used. These phases included (a) site selections based on work-conditions survey, (b) conducting face-to-face individual interviews with principals, (c) surveying teachers in selected schools, (d) conducting focus-group sessions with teachers at each site, and (e) conducting multiple analyses to identify themes and categories found within the data.

During the first phase of the study, six schools were selected for the study because they exhibited the highest scores in the area of teacher empowerment based on staff responses the 2015 Kentucky Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Kentucky Survey. This survey is administered by the Kentucky Department of Education every two years in order to assess perspectives among stakeholders about working conditions. The TELL Kentucky survey was created by the Kentucky Teacher and Leader Working Conditions Coalition, which continues to provide oversight and guidance about the design, development, and deployment of the survey. It was first administered during the spring of 2011. The TELL Kentucky Survey gathers a variety of information from teachers, counselors, principals, and other administrators. The survey includes questions about adequacy of facilities and resources, available time, teacher empowerment, school leadership, community support, student conduct, professional development, mentoring and induction services for new teachers, and student learning.

During the second phase of the study, a semi-structured individual interview was conducted with each principal at each of the five purposefully selected schools. Each of these principals were in their positions when the 2015 TELL Kentucky survey was completed. The interviews were held to gather principal perceptions about how constructive conflict is being used within their schools to promote individual growth and organizational learning. The research goals during this phase were to

- Gain an understanding of how conflict is used as a productive force.
- Determine what organizational conditions generated high levels of teacher empowerment reported via the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey.

- Identify actions that school leaders use to promote individual growth and
  organizational learning.

During the third phase of the study, all teachers at these same six schools were invited to complete an online survey, which was adapted from Lencioni's (2002) Five Dysfunctions of a Team survey and informed by multiple other resources. The goal of the third phase of the study was to gather data about school culture and personnel perceptions about conflict, collaboration, and team dynamics from the teachers' perspective.

During the fourth phase of the study, focus-group interviews with teachers at each of the six schools were conducted to gain further insight into how constructive conflict is used to promote individual growth and organizational learning. The research goals during this phase were to

- Gain an understanding of how conflict is used as a productive force.

- Determine what organizational conditions produced high levels of teacher empowerment reported via the 2015 TELL Kentucky survey.

- Identify actions that school leaders use to promote individual growth and organizational learning.

The final phase of this study was data analysis to identify how conflict is addressed in a constructive manner and to determine strategies that could be recommended to other schools to promote constructive conflict. Responses from the interview and focus-group data were analyzed using Corbin and Strauss's (2008) four-stage coding method. All interviews were transcribed professionally and analyzed using QSR International's NVivo for Windows software. All transcriptions were coded line-by-line to identify common perceptions among study participants. The goals during the final

phase were to develop an understanding of the ways in which conflict is being used constructively for promoting individual growth and organizational learning in schools where teacher empowerment is reported to be high.

Minimization of Potential Researcher Bias

As an experienced teacher leader in a public elementary school located in the district where the study was conducted, I was quite familiar with the struggle to address conflict constructively in schools. Although the school where I work evidenced higher teacher empowerment, it is excluded from my study. To minimize potential researcher bias, I selected schools where I have never been employed and did not know personally the principals of the schools where data were collected until I conducted their private interviews.

Limitations Due to Personnel Changes

Changes in school personnel after the study was launched may have influenced study outcomes. All six principal interviews were completed during the summer of 2016, and all six interviewees were serving as the principal of their school when the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey data were collected. However, changes in school leadership occurred after my interviews, but prior to the opening of the 2016-2017 school year. One principal retired and was replaced by the assistant principal at that school, apparently providing a smooth transition of leadership for the teachers. Two other principals assumed new positions within the same district and were replaced by retired principals to serve as the interim principal until permanent replacements could be selected. Prior to focus-group interviews at the schools with principal changes, I asked the teachers to reflect on the time with their former principal. Because the survey administered to

teachers and the focus-group interviews with teachers occurred after the changes in the principalship, evidence of changes in principal leadership may appear in commentary presented in Chapter 4.

Summary

This chapter began with an explanation of how organizational learning is related to teacher empowerment and conflict. It also included a statement of the problem, purpose, and significance of study, and an overview of the methodology. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the possible limitations of the study. Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive literature review on diverse aspects related to the study, and Chapter 3 provides a detailed description about the research methodology. Chapter 4 presents a study findings based on themes that emerged from analysis of data gathered through private interviews with principals and focus-group interviews with teachers at the same schools. Where appropriate, a short discuss of survey results from administration of an online survey are also presented. Chapter 5 links study findings with literature and presents implications for future research and for practice. The appendices include review board approval documentation, copies of all data collection instruments, and tables displaying results for relevant elements of the online survey. The final sections of the dissertation include references for all works cited and my curricular vitae.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Change seems to be the only constant in today's public schools. Approaches to change stretch beyond focusing on compliance or support for new programs to an emphasis on organizational learning and capacity building within schools (Higgins et al., 2012; Stoll, 2009). "Over and beyond identifying effective curricula or requiring educators to use data to improve performance, schools must strengthen their internal capacity to manage change processes in order to reach high levels of performance" (Higgins, Ishimaru, Hocombe, & Fowler, 2012, p. 72). According to Baek-Kyoo and Ji Hyun (2010), an organizational-learning culture appears to be one of the key contextual components to enhance positive organizational outcomes.

Organizational Learning

Organizational learning is a purposeful process that requires members of an organization to concentrate on problems and issues, rather than readily accepting easy or familiar solutions (Collinson & Cook, 2006). According to McGill and Slocum (1993), organizational learning is "the ability of an organization to gain insight and understanding from experience through experimentation, observation, analysis, and a willingness to examine both successes and failures" (p. 11). Fostering educational reform and school improvement is not the concentration of organizational learning; instead, the focus is on the progression that enables a school to strive towards continual renewal (Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998). Recognizing how people study complex problems, solve them, and in addition, escape errors, is the nature of organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

All organizations undergo both intentional and unintentional learning. Both are significant, but in schools that evidence organizational learning, there is a focus on planned individual and group learning that is deliberate, supported, and encouraged. This type of everyday work is apparent in the regular activities of the organization and will lead to ongoing transformation of the organization. By sharing expertise and knowledge among organizational members, organizations are likely to be more innovative, effective, and successful (Argote, 1999; Wernerfelt, 1984). Therefore, it is likely that "the more employees perceive an organization as providing continuous learning opportunities, empowerment, system connection, and strategic leadership, the more likely they will be psychologically attached to their organization" (Baek-Kyoo & Ji Hyun, 2010, p. 430).

Rather than unconsciously accepting the static procedures of the organization, members are required to contemplate issues within a community of learners (Wenger, 2009). Members make it a priority to discover erroneous beliefs, examine current ways of operating, learn from mistakes, and guarantee that valuable ideas and innovations extend beyond individual members. Within organizations, errors - more than successes - inspire investigation. Simply asking questions such as *Why did this happen?* can activate the learning process (Collinson & Cook, 2006).

Pursuit of organizational learning is not without problems. Lencioni (2002) claims there are five dysfunctions of organizations that can hinder learning: (a) absence of trust, (b) fear of conflict, (c) lack of commitment, (d) avoidance of accountability, and (e) inattention to results. This study will concentrate on four dysfunction themes—trust, commitment, accountability, and conflict. An exploration of these themes follows.

Trust

Trust between supervisors and employees is essential to promote information accessibility (Gardiner & Whiting, 1997). Without trust, collaboration and teamwork are virtually unattainable (Lencioni, 2002). Further, Gardner (1990) posits that the diverse and complicated activities within societies would cease if individuals did not trust each other. Leaders contribute significantly to creating and maintaining the necessary level of trust. Thus, it is critical for leaders to inspire trust in themselves and then work to increase the level of trust throughout the organization (Gardner, 1990). Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) define trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable" (p. 712), which in turn depends on perceived trustworthiness—that quality of the trusted party that makes the trustor willing to be vulnerable. Trust eases fear that others will be unscrupulous and restores confidence that responsibilities will be completed reliably (Bradach & Eccles, 1989; Sitkin & Roth, 1993). Thus, trust is crucial to organizational learning capability.

Although relational trust is an essential ingredient in a thriving school, it is rarely examined (Brewster & Railsback, 2003) because it is challenging to accurately determine the level of trust in an organization and impossible to link to specific results. However, organizational members can state whether or not trust is present. Researchers have verified that the quality of relationships within a school district impacts the health of the school. Hale (2000), authored The Comprehensive School Reform Program (CSR) booklet published by WestEd, and asserted that school leaders must build a foundation composed of trust, agreement with and support of intendent organizational goal, and a shared vision for change. Hale identifies the components of trust as benevolence,

reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. Bryk and Schneider (2002), who

analyzed the relationships between trust and student achievement, found that "trust

fosters a set of organizational conditions, some structural and others social-psychological,

that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of

activities necessary to affect productivity improvement" (p.116). Although they found

that trust does not guarantee success, they suggest that schools with little or no trust have

almost no chance of improving.

Commitment

Organizational successfulness is contingent upon organizational commitment

(Westover et al., 2010) and influenced by "an individual's psychological bond to an

organization as a whole" (Baek-Kyoo & Ji Hyun, 2010, p. 427). Members of an

organization with strong commitment wish to be effective participants within the

organization, have an impact on the happenings, feel that they are valued, and want to

contribute beyond what is expected of them (Bogler & Somech, 2004).

Organizational learning begins with individual members and then spreads

throughout the whole organization (Senge, 1990); thus, organizations can maintain

continuity only through their members' commitment (Atak & Erturgut, 2010).

Organizations that evidence empowerment and an organizational-learning culture

positively are significantly affected the level of the members' organizational commitment

(Baek-Kyoo & Ji Hyun, 2010). In fact, organizational commitment is a strong predictor

of teacher success in P12 schools (Dee et al., 2006). Additionally, Hulpia and Devos

(2010) reported that teachers who felt committed towards the school were willing to exert

themselves for the school.

Accountability

Accountability among all members of an organization is necessary for organizational success, particularly when members collaborate. Lencioni (2002) asserts, "In the context of teamwork, [accountability] refers specifically to the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance of behaviors that might hurt the team" (p. 212). In an organization where members are not free to state their opinions, despite the inevitability of disagreement, there is not possibility for accountability. When members are not held accountable by their peers, organizational success will be difficult to achieve.

Conflict

Legitimate differences and disagreements can stem from the increased participation in organizational learning (Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992), because organizational members are free to voice their concerns or objections. One of the costs of human relations and interdependence—both necessary for organizational learning—is occasional conflict (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Little, 1990). Conflict that occurs between individual group members within organizations usually represents a "difference in values, perceptions, and beliefs that results in each party's being confronted with its own values, beliefs, perceptions" (Friedlander, 1983, p. 204). Hence, conflict is inevitable within organizations. Even when employees are working together toward collective goals, there are differences in opinion as to how to meet the objectives. Pruitt and Rubin (1986) describe conflict as a time when "both parties' aspirations cannot be satisfied at the same time" (p. 4). The parties foresee interference from each other in achieving their goals (Uline, 2003).

Not all conflict is unhealthy, and not all cooperation is healthy (Robinson, 1972).

Conflict contributes to higher levels of learning and is particularly relevant to strategic management because it is this level of learning that impacts long-term survival of an organization (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Conflict has been shown to be instrumental in creating shared understandings, a key process through which group learning and ultimately organizational learning occurs (Crossan et al., 1999; Senge, 1990). Some scholars see conflict as constructive because it can produce honest and open discussions leading toward better decision making (De Dreu, 2008). Although conflict is necessary to prompt learning, conflict frequently inhibits learning by triggering defensive responses among all parties involved. The test for organizations is to create a climate where individuals have the freedom to express their ideas in a risk-safe environment and collaboratively determine a solution that benefits everyone.

Although most people, consciously or unconsciously, appreciate some of the qualities of orderly environments, it is within such environments, where work is routine, that opportunities for innovation and change are virtually eliminated. Nearly all government organizations work within a very disorderly context, characterized by constant change and a need for constant adaptation. Trying to structure away conflict and disagreement in a dynamic environment requires tremendous amounts of energy. It also suppresses any positive outcomes that may come from disagreement, such as improved decision-making and innovation. Original solutions are necessary for P12 schools to cope with changes in expectations (Tjosvold, 1998), but the typical response to change initiatives, even those that have promised to serve clients more effectively, is often resistance, tension, and conflict.

Schools are places where human interactions cannot be avoided (Collinson &
Cook, 2006) because interpersonal interactions are constant. These interactions, as well
as introduction of constant change to meet external demands, can become sources of
conflicts, which is difficult on teachers, administrators, and other district employees who
feel comfortable with the status quo. Thus, the ability of school districts to adapt and
evolve to meet continuous demands and deal effectively with conflict, which is an
avoidable part of change, may determine the long-term sustainability of public education.
According to DiPaloa and Hoy (2001), "Conflict will not disappear, nor should it be
ignored; indeed, it is on the daily menu of school administrators" (p. 239). Administrators
can assist in improving the school culture by seeking to understand the relationship
between conflict and change. They further assert that school administrators are often
unsure about how to deal with conflict in their organizations due to the multiple demands
they face daily. Not only are people unaccustomed to dealing with conflict, there is a
cultural tendency to avoid uncomfortable situations (Folger et al., 1997).

In the past, scholars researched conflict in an attempt to resolve it and diminish its
negative effects on the effectiveness of the organization and the individuals involved
(DiPaloa & Hoy, 2001). Conflict within P12 education may be manifested as personality
conflicts, cliques, parking-lot conversations after the faculty meetings, suspicion and
competition, and staff meetings that focus on safe logistical topics instead of on learning
(Collinson & Cook, 2006). The elimination of conflict seemed to be the objective among
most administrators (Getzels & Guba, 1957).

Until recently, conflict generally had a negative connotation because it was seen
as a taxing, disruptive occurrence; however, within contemporary organizations there has

been a change in perceptions about conflict according to research. For example, conflict has been found to produce healthy discussions leading toward better decision making (De Dreu, 2008). Conflict is not inherently positive or negative but rather how it is managed (Jones, 2005). Thus, although researchers agree that conflict can be detrimental to relationships and productivity, some have found that conflict—when handled appropriately—can also be a stimulus for innovation in organizations.

Within their political frame of an organization, Bolman and Deal (1991) do not view conflict as a problem or an issue to fix. Instead, they argue that because of scarce resources and enduring differences, conflict is critical to organizational dynamics and power is the crucial resource. In the political perspective, where there are limited resources, individuals are competing for jobs, titles, and power. Thus conflict is natural, inevitable, and not necessarily negatives. The focus in this view is not on the resolution of conflict but on strategies and tactics of conflict (Bolman & Deal). The issue is not the inevitability of conflict but rather how to avoid destructive conflict while promoting constructive conflict.

Cognitive and Affective Conflict

Group conflict primarily falls into two categories: (a) the conscious level where task is the focus and (b) the process level where group maintenance and interpersonal dynamics are at the forefront. These conflict issues can be categorized in terms of being task related (cognitive) or being social-emotional related (affective). Evidence suggests people are able to detect whether conflict is characterized by strong emphasis on ongoing relationships rather than elements of the task or whether conflict contains attention to

affective states such as hatred and jealousy (Thomas, 1992). There are two types of

conflict are not always beneficial to improving the effectiveness of school districts.

The distinction between cognitive and affective conflict issues is key to

understanding productive conflict. De Dreu and Weingart (2003) reported findings from

several studies on the influence of cognitive versus affective conflict. They found that

affective conflict lowers decision quality and reduces performance and satisfaction,

whereas cognitive conflict enhances decision quality and overall group performance

(Amason, 1996: Jehn, 1997; Turner & Pratkanis, 1994). Cognitive issues tend to be task

related and focused on roles, policies, resources, and enhance group performance.

Affective issues, in contrast, are social-emotional and focused on norms and values that

reduce performance and satisfaction. The problem with maintaining and promoting

cognitive conflict is that cognitive debates easily evoke affective issues.

Recent research has implied that task conflicts have positive effects on

interpersonal relations, group performance, and customer satisfaction when team

members have a cooperative rather than a competitive goal interdependence. Other

studies have found that within an atmosphere tolerant of differing viewpoints, teams can

benefit from task conflict (Tjosvold, 1998; Uline, et al., 2003).

Effects of Conflict

Conflict can be a positive force, and if handled constructively, can move a group

forward. If handled negatively, conflict can be destructive because it can cause stress and

tension, leading to consequences such as decreased effectiveness and poor morale.

"Conflict holds the potential for change, for better or worse" (Folger et al., 1993, p. 163).

Conflict is destructive if those involved are not satisfied with the outcome, whereas

conflict is perceived as productive if the participants are relatively satisfied with the outcome (Deutsch, 1973). Thus, when well managed, conflict can lead to increased levels of productivity and creativity in organizations (Uline et al., 2003). Being able to deal with conflict appropriately is the key to making it productive. While avoidance is a common managerial strategy, the long-term damage is usually a drop in productivity and morale due to ongoing conflict and disagreement (Ken Blanchard Companies, 2010). Conditions that influence whether a conflict will become destructive or constructive include (a) characteristics of the parties involved, (b) relationships among individuals, (c) nature of the conflict, (d) social environment surrounding the conflict, (e) interested audiences and their relationship with conflicting parties, (f) strategies and tactics used by the parties involved, and (g) predicted consequences of the conflict (Deutsch, 1973).

Destructive Conflict

Conflict results when at least two parties are engaged in a struggle because they perceive their goals to be incompatible, and they foresee interference from each other in achieving their goals (Uline et al., 2003). The test for organizations is to create a climate where employees have freedom to express their ideas in a risk-safe environment and collaboratively come to a solution that benefits everyone.

Many challenges exist in creating an environment that fosters constructive conflict, rather than destructive conflict. Competition is one of these challenges because efforts to win often causes escalation in disputes, which leads to deconstructive conflict (Deutsch, 1973). Once conflict has turned destructive, it tends to escalate and expand.

Constructive Conflict

Positive consequences of conflict include strengthening relationships and clarifying goals, resulting in three positive effects of conflict: (a) bettering the quality of decisions, (b) promoting the level of involvement in discussion, and (c) strengthening group unity (Jones, 2005). Additional benefits of conflict include preventing stagnation, inspiring curiosity, exposing issues, and fixing problems (Coser, 1956; Simmel, 1955). Although some conflict can be beneficial, the helpful aspects deteriorate quickly if the conflict becomes stronger and issues become more serious. Only when high levels of openness and trust are present can task conflict potentially have a positive effect on team performance. Teams that tend to be more collaborative and less contentious are more likely to deal positively with conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

Constructive conflict is a vital resource for individual growth and organizational learning. To disagree constructively means to disagree with ideas and perspectives rather than with the individual holding them, to suspend the rash to judgment so that an idea can have a genuine hearing, and to listen with the democratic commitment that one's mind might change if presented with new and convincing data (Graham, 2003).

Reactions to Conflict

Friedlander (1983) argued that cooperation and assertiveness play major roles in how a conflict is handled. He described cooperation as an attempt to "satisfy the other party's concerns" and assertiveness as an attempt to "satisfy one's own concerns" (p. 207). These two dimensions are recognizable in his observations of five ways in which people handle conflict:

- Avoidance (uncooperative and unassertive)

- Competition (uncooperative and assertive)

- Accommodation (cooperative and unassertive)

- Compromise (intermediate both in cooperativeness and assertiveness)

- Collaboration (cooperative and assertive)

Avoidance of conflict is one of the most dangerous ways to handle conflict (Collinson & Cook, 2006) because it does not allow emotions to surface in a productive way, and it represents both an uncooperative and unassertive position (Friedlander, 1983). As with undiscussable issues, people know the conflict exists but pretend it does not. Avoidance can impede learning and trust because beneath the image of congeniality, the conflict nevertheless invokes defensive behaviors that block learning (Collinson & Cook).

How Leaders Address Conflict

Learning to deal with conflict productively is a necessary part of becoming and being a leader. Without effective communication strategies, the task may prove to be impossible. However, conflict that occurs in organizations need not be destructive, provided the energy associated with conflict is harnessed and directed towards problem-solving and organizational improvement.

The contemporary outlook on organizational conflict sees conflict as a productive force, one that can encourage members of the organization to increase their knowledge and skills, and their contribution to organizational innovation and productivity (Heenan & Bennis, 1999). This more modern approach considers that the secret to organizational success does not rest in structure, clarity and orderliness, but in creativity, responsiveness and adaptability (De Dreu, 1997). The successful organization sees conflict as necessary,

so that diverging views can be put on the table, and new ways of doing things can be created (Senge, 2014).

The literature points to an overwhelming question for leaders, *How can we manage conflict and produce positive change?* Addressing conflict constructively provides an opportunity for leaders to produce positive change. Leaders are challenged to handle conflict effectively, thereby increasing problem solving, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and decreasing stress surrounding the conflict (Northouse, 2012). A positive outcome can result in increased satisfaction levels for leaders and staff and can lessen disruptions in the relationship.

Interpersonal relationships may decline when conflict is not addressed properly (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Moskowitz & Rupert, 1983). More serious implications of unresolved conflict involve employees hiding their differences and ignoring feedback from leaders. Ensuring that both leaders and staff feel comfortable with open communication in a proactive approach can increase trust in the relationship. Personal growth and professional growth are possible outcomes when leaders initiate and address concerns directly with the employee. According to Moskowitz and Rupert, employees, rather than leaders, most often initiate conversations related to conflict. Effective leaders resolve conflict by (a) accepting conflict as part of work, (b) displaying a caring attitude, (c) being willing to learn from employees, and (d) displaying a collaborative manner of working with employees (Nelson, Barnes, Evans, & Triggiano, 2008).

Creating a Culture for Constructive Conflict

Conflict is helpful and necessary to improving work relationships. According to Nellis, Hawkins, Redivo, and Way (2011), productive conflict resolution can be achieved

by leaders (a) being aware of their employees' developmental level and needs; (b) displaying empathy, patience, and flexibility; (c) accepting support from colleagues; (d) being sensitive when delivering difficult feedback; (e) demonstrating behavioral approaches and problem solving strategies; (f) observing supervisees' performance; and (g) communicating strengths through praise.

Despite the fact that conflict may represent a potent source of learning, teachers have a tradition of avoiding conflict (Little, 1990). To overcome this impediment to organizational learning and change adoption, teachers and leaders need to learn how to approach and manage conflicts resulting from discussions involving assumptions, beliefs, and practices of individuals or groups. The less frequent that individuals engage in learning and the less informed their beliefs and practices are, the more difficult it is for them to discuss conflicting beliefs or courses of action. In the absence of interpersonal skills that support listening and dialogue, the more difficult the task, the more conflict it generates. The greater the difficulty and conflict, the less likely it is that people will want to engage in it, thus cutting off an important source of learning (Collinson & Cook, 2006).

The first step in managing conflict effectively is to develop a constructive context, one that determines whether the conflict is managed constructively or destructively (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Conflict management impacts the occurrences and nature of conflict. Using well-defined and followed problem solving strategies and protocols are two of the most constructive conflict management strategies (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). The objective of these strategies is to integrate interests of those in conflict to achieve mutually satisfying outcomes.

Differences of backgrounds, professional experiences, perceptions, and values among individuals produce conflict, but they also make an organization more robust and vigorous. The learning involved in managing conflict develops individual members' skills while at the same time enriching the group and the organization. Conflict can, however, be a source of learning if it leads to a new understanding, compromise or consensus, a new decision, an agreement to disagree, or an agreement to engage in further inquiry. Conflict can also result in learning if it uncovers deeper organizational problems and issues such as cultural barriers to learning (Collinson & Cook, 2006).

If leaders subscribe to a flexible vision of effective organizations and recognize that each conflict situation provides opportunity to improve, they can then shift their views of conflict. Rather than trying to eliminate conflict, or suppress its symptoms, the task becomes managing conflict so that it enhances people and organizations, rather than destroying people and organizations.

Contemporary organizations encourage dissent among members because effective negotiation of dissent makes people seek to understand each other and treat each other fairly (Rahim, 2002). Instead of moving an organization forward by listening carefully to one another and seeking to understand interpersonal differences, employees often stay quiet due to the fear of being labeled a troublemaker, losing credibility, or potential retaliatory measures when offering different perspectives or taking a stance based on clear evidence to the contrary (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). Cooperative problem solving, which involves parties coming together to solve the problems due to their mutual goals, can lead to productive conflict resolution. The cooperative problem-solving process involves open communication between participants, acknowledgement of each side's

needs and interests, and trust between the participants, which increases the recognition of similarities among participants and deemphasizes the differences (Deutsch, 1973).

The promise of conflict is that learning can result when individuals explore the reasoning behind their conflicting positions and the meaning these positions have for them and others (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Bush & Folger, 1994). Jones (2005) believes that members of a group need to own the conflict and that every member must understand they are the true stakeholders in the resolution. Conflict resolution is not based on ensuring that all members get along, but rather that there is active involvement among all the members in reaching a mutually acceptable agreement (Behfar et al., 2008). Van Slyke (1997) contends that it is imperative that both sides of a disagreement want to come to a mutual solution—that all parties move from competition to collaboration. The resolution needs to be fair and meet the needs of all parties to ensure that the conflict can be an opportunity to grow.

Groupthink

A peaceful and harmonious organization may very well have an apathetic, uncreative, stagnant, and unresponsive culture (Heffron, 1989) because conflict can be a catalyst in the development of high-performing groups or teams (Lecioni, 2002). Moreover, suppressing conflict may lead to groupthink, a tendency to produce uncritical like-mindedness (Janis, 1985).

The absence of conflict translates into ineffective decision making and colleagues who are only pretending to be harmonious (Bowman, 2001). Thus, administrators who seek to create a homogeneous faculty and suppress minority dissent are actually reducing creativity and innovation (De Dreu, 1997). Accoring to Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and

Bourgeois (1997), "without conflict, groups lose their effectiveness" and colleagues

"often become withdrawn and only superficially harmonious" (p. 77). Similarly, Ryan,

Oestreich, and Orr (1996) have suggested that "failing to speak up has a negative impact

on both the person and the organization, including the loss of productivity, negative

attitudes toward the organization, failure to meet deadlines or budgets, and loss of self-

esteem" (p. 5). This supports Eisenhardt and colleagues (1997) assert that " the

alternative to conflict is usually not agreement but apathy and disengagement" (p. 77).

Further, Heenan and Bennis (1999) posit, "Organizations that appreciate the power of

disharmony and the importance of speaking out have an enormous edge over those that

prefer the comfort of unanimity" (p. 277). Hence, smart organizations "recognize the cost

of insights unshared and constructive criticism unspoken and welcome honest dissent

within the ranks" (p. 300).

Lack of conflict is different from avoidance of conflict. Lack of conflict occurs

when examination of norms is avoided and groupthink prevails. Janis (1972) wrote,

> Groupthink is a quick and easy way to refer to a mode of thinking that people
> engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the
> members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically
> appraise alternative courses of action. (p. 9)

When groupthink is prevalent, exposing differences takes a back seat to relationships that

might be hurt if members received negative feedback. The degree to which members

agree to avoid exposing differences is the degree to which they will fail to learn. If no

new perspectives are raised, no dissonance will occur. Without new perspectives, no new

meanings will be constructed to relieve the tension of dissonance and no learning will

occur.

For many years, group cohesiveness has been perceived as having a positive effect on group behavior (Lewin, 1947), such as members' positive valuation of the group and a motivation to continue to belong to the group. Cartwright (1968) concluded that group cohesiveness increases the degree of participation by members in the group's activities and provides a source of security for members, which serves to reduce their anxiety and heighten their self-esteem. Previous studies have thus tried to propose techniques to avoid, reduce, or immediately resolve conflict. However, more recent research has revealed that group cohesiveness may have negative impacts on group performance and learning. These studies have shown that the ability to extract and use the participants' contributions can be harmed by having too much cohesiveness in the group because it can reduce critical evaluation of assumptions and recommendations (Eisenhardt et al., 1998; Janis, 1972; Tjosvoid, 1991).

Summary

The premise of this study is that constructive conflict can be used as a means to promote individual growth and learning. The culture within schools, which evidence high levels of teacher empowerment, was examined to determine how conflict is handled (i.e., not through force, but through mutual respect and collaboration). Many definitions can be attributed to key terms used throughout my study. In order to assure clarity of understanding about how these terms are used in this research, I provide the definitions of key terms used in this study in Table 2.1. The words appearing in italics, which I use for emphasis here, are the directly quoted words appearing in the sources cited immediately afterwards. Complete citations for all works cited appear in References as the end of the dissertation.

Table 2.1 Definition of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Organizational Learning	*"The deliberate use of individual, group, and system learning to embed new thinking and practices that continuously renew and transform the organization in ways that support shared aims"* (Collinson & Cook, 2006, p. 8)
Teacher Empowerment	*"Shared decision-making in schools"* (Washington, 1991, p. 16)
Conflict	*"A difference in values, perceptions, and beliefs that results in each party's being confronted with its own values, beliefs, perceptions"* (Friedlander, 1983, p. 204)
Constructive Conflict	*"Disagreement with ideas and perspectives rather than with the individual holding them, to suspend the rash to judgment so that an idea can have a genuine hearing, and to listen with the democratic commitment that one's mind might change if presented with new and convincing data"* (Graham, 2003, p. 114)
Destructive Conflict	*"Disagreement where those involved are not satisfied with the outcome"* (Deutsch, 1973).
Cognitive Conflict (Task)	*"Issues related to distribution of resources, procedures and policies, and judgments and interpretation of facts"* (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003, p. 741)
Affective Conflict (Emotional)	*"Issues about personal taste, political preferences, values, and interpersonal style"* (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003, p. 741)

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to determine how conflict is being used constructively to promote individual growth and organizational learning in P12 schools where a risk-safe environment exists and teacher empowerment is high. Although researchers agree that conflict can be detrimental to relationships and productivity, some scholars believe it can also be a stimulus for innovation in organizations (Bowman, 2011). This study examined the ways that conflict can act as a positive force in schools by producing healthy discussions leading toward better decision making. This chapter presents the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and analysis strategies.

Research Design

A predominately qualitative approach was chosen for this study because unlike quantitative research, which explains phenomena in terms of magnitude or amount, qualitative data provides insight into the human psyche (Aaker, Kumar, & Day, 2008). That is, qualitative research involves finding out what people think and how they feel about an issue, which involves verbal expression rather than numbers (Bellenger, Bernhardt, & Goldstucker, 2011).

This research design was also an exploratory case study. According to Yin (2011), a case study design should be considered when: (a) The emphasis of the study is to answer *how* and *why* questions; (b) the behavior of those involved in the study cannot be influenced; (c) the context or background conditions may be influence on the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon

and the situation. Case study methodology is appropriate when the researcher has little to no control over events, when the focus of the study is a contemporary phenomenon that is set within a real-life framework, and when the research questions are *how* or *why* (Yin, 2011). The *how* question that guides my research focuses on how conflict is used constructively to promote individual growth and learning. Besides investigating organizational context and phenomena, case studies allow for a careful examination of process (Merriam, 1998). Using case study methodology enabled me to gather data from a variety of sources at multiple sites and to join the data to clarify the case.

Research Questions

The overarching research question for this study was, *How is conflict used constructively for promoting individual growth and organizational learning in schools within a Kentucky school district where a risk-safe environment exits and where teacher empowerment is high?* The four guiding questions listed below assured that the research question was answered:

1. How do schools address conflict?

2. To what extent is consensus the ultimate goal when conflict arises within a school?

3. In what ways do schools use conflict to support problem solving?

4. In what ways do schools consider conflict in regards to interpersonal relationships?

Three data-collection protocols were developed for this study: (a) an interview protocol to gather information from principals during individual interviews (see Appendix D); (b) an online survey for staff members in the six selected schools, which

included 31 Likert-scale questions, 5 demographic questions, and 1 open-ended question (see Appendix E); and (c) a focus-group interview protocol to gather information from groups of teachers (see Appendix G). The anticipated outcome of the study was a detailed description about how conflict is being used constructively within schools where there is a risk-safe environment and teacher empowerment is high.

Study Focus

Because conflict is present within organizations, including P12 schools, leaders must understand how to handle conflict effectively. Constructive conflict can increase problem-solving success, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and decrease stress that some individuals experience during conflict. Further, conflict is often a component of personnel supervision, which can be transformed into an asset when used productively. Six schools with high levels of teacher empowerment, evidenced by results on the 2015 Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Kentucky Survey administered by the Kentucky Department of Education, were selected for this study. The focus of this study was to examine the environment in these schools and determine how conflict is being used constructively in these schools where teacher empowerment was reported being high. Because this study examined how conflict is being used in a productive manner (i.e., within schools where a risk-safe environment exits and teacher empowerment is high), findings produced valuable information (e.g., promising practices and strategies for using conflict constructively for use in any P12 school).

Study Context

The Kentucky Department of Education administers the TELL survey every two years to assess perspectives among P12 stakeholders about working conditions in

schools. The survey was created by the Kentucky Teacher and Leader Working

Conditions Coalition, which continues to provide oversight and guidance about the

design, development, and deployment of the survey. First administered during the spring

of 2011, the TELL Kentucky Survey gathers a variety of information from teachers,

counselors, principals, and other administrators. The survey includes questions about

adequacy of facilities and resources, available time, teacher empowerment, school

leadership, community support, student conduct, professional development, mentoring

and induction services for new teachers, and student learning. Certified school-based

educators throughout the Commonwealth completed the anonymous online TELL

Kentucky Survey during March 2015. Results were available for schools and districts

reaching the 50% minimum response rate and minimum of five educators responding.

Thus, the first step in planning this study was analysis of the 2015 survey results for the

selected Kentucky school district in order to identify schools evidencing high teacher

empowerment. This analysis was completed by determining which questions from the

TELL Kentucky Survey related directly to teacher empowerment; the questions were

selected from the *Perceptions of Teacher Leadership* section of the TELL Kentucky

Survey.

Research Site

A convenience sample was chosen from a Kentucky school district. The district

had a response rate of 89.42% on the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey among all certified

personnel working within its schools. The selected district is located in central Kentucky

and serves more than 40,000 children and youth residing within a metropolitan area and

its adjacent rural areas. Currently, the district has 36 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, and 5 high schools.

The overarching purpose of this study was to determine how conflict is being used constructively for promoting individual growth and organizational learning in schools where a risk-safe environment exists and teacher empowerment is high. Two questions on the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey contained statements about teacher leadership and school leadership that align with concepts in the research and professional literature about safe working environments and teacher empowerment. For this study, a *risk-safe environment* was defined as a school where mutual respect and trust among personnel is expected and where teachers feel confident in raising issues or concerns without fear of being punished or ostracized. *Teacher empowerment* is evident in a school where teachers are recognized and treated as professionals and where they actively engage in decision making and leadership. Thus, among the 36 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, and 5 high schools, the schools within the district with the highest response rates and the highest combined percentage of *agree or strongly agree* responses on the two 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey questions determined potential study sites within the district. This data is displayed in Tables 3.1 and 3.2.

A second consideration in selecting study sites was the type of school. For this study, I used the Kentucky definitions for three school types: (a) an *elementary school* is defined as one serving students in Kindergarten through Grade 5, (b) a *middle school* is one serving students in Grade 6-Grade 8, and (c) a *high school* as one serving students in Grade 9-12. Using these school-type definitions, I selected the two schools in each classification as those with (a) the highest combined percentage of *agree* or *strongly*

agree responses for questions about teacher leadership and school leadership and (b) a response rate of 75% or higher for personnel participation on the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey.

Table 3.1 below displays combined percentage for *agree* or *strongly agree* responses to questions about teacher leadership for the six study sites (i.e., two elementary schools, two middle schools, two high schools) in the selected Kentucky school district. The response rate in the table refers to the percent within the school's population that responded *agree* or *strongly agree* to statements about teacher leadership. The names for schools in the table are pseudonyms, which are used throughout this study report.

Table 3.1 Perceptions of Teacher Leadership

TELL Kentucky Survey Question	**Responses from Selected Schools**					
Q 6.1 Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about teacher leadership in your school.	Percentage of Agree or Strongly Agree					
	Victory ES Response Rate (89.42%)	Midway ES Response Rate (95%)	Samson MS Response Rate (100%)	Johnson MS Response Rate (89.61%)	Logan HS Response Rate (81.95%)	Davidson HS Response Rate (87.31%)
a. Teachers are recognized as educational experts.	100	100	99	89	87	82.1
b. Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.	100	100	100	93	88	83.6

Table 3.1 Cont. Perceptions of Teacher Leadership

c.	Teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues.	**100**	**100**	**98**	**90**	**83**	**77.6**
d.	Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles.	100	98	98	95	87	84.3

After the initial selection of study sites, TELL Kentucky Survey scores for the same six schools were analyzed in the area of school leadership because the components of organizational learning are directly related to the prompts about school leadership. Table 3.2 displays responses for these five questions in this area. As in table above, the response rate in table below refers to the percent of personnel within the school's population who responded *agree* or *strongly agree* to statements about school leadership.

Table 3.2 Perceptions of School Leadership

TELL Kentucky Survey Question	Responses from Selected Schools					
Q 7.1 Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about school leadership in your school.	Percent Agree or Strongly Agree					
	Victory ES Response Rate (89.42%)	Midway ES Response Rate (95%)	Samson MS Response Rate (100%)	Johnson MS Response Rate (89.61%)	Logan HS Response Rate (81.95%)	Davidson HS Response Rate (87.31%)
a. The faculty and leadership have a shared vision.	100	97.3	100	92.5	87	69.9
b. There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in this school.	98	97.4	98.3	95.5	88	67.8

Table 3.2 Cont. Perceptions of School Leadership

c.	Teachers feel comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to them.	97.9	94.6	96.6	91	82.9	60.5
d.	The school leadership consistently support teachers.	100	100	96.6	82.1	87	66.1
e.	Teachers are held to high professional standards for delivering instruction.	98	100	98.2	97.1	86.8	93.0

The 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey data from the selected district shows a decline in the response rate across a continuum from elementary school (high response rate) to high school (low response rate). The level of satisfaction among teachers concerning school leadership likewise declines from elementary school to high school. Findings from this study may provide reasons for these two trends.

Data Collection Practices

Data collection was conducted in three phases: (a) Individual interviews with principal at each school were conducted; (b) with consent of the principals, a survey was administered to all teachers at the six selected schools; and (c) focus-group interviews with teacher volunteers were conducted at each school. The following sections provide details about each data collection strategy.

Principal interview. During the first phase of the study, principals at each of the six schools participated in individual interviews during the summer of 2016—and all six principals were in the same position when the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey data were

collected. Excluding time for the principals to read and sign the approved consent form and to review the interview protocol and ask for clarification about any questions, the duration of each interview was approximately 45 minutes. The purpose of the interviews was to gather school leaders' perceptions about how conflict can produce healthy discussions that in turn produce better decision making. The goal of conducting these interviews was to reveal how principals believe conflict is handled in their schools. Appendix D presents the semi-structured interview protocol for the principal interviews. All principals were asked the same questions.

Online survey. The second phase of the study involved collection of data through an online survey administered electronically via Qualtrics. Creation of the only survey was guided by questions posed on Lencioni's (2002) Five Dysfunctions of a Team survey and the TELL Kentucky survey as well as literature on teacher development. Prompts on the online survey was also informed by several sources about organizational learning, school climate, team building, and conflict. The survey was reviewed by elementary, middle, and high school teachers outside the selected schools but in the same district; modifications based on teacher responses were made to the survey questions to assure clarity. The reviews took place through cognitive interviews: "Cognitive interviews are typically used as semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which enable the interviewer to form impressions about where the problems in a questionnaire lie" (Conrad & Blair, 1996, p. 1).

All teachers employed at each of the six selected schools were invited via an electronic mail message from me to complete the online survey composed of 31 Likert-scale questions, 1 open-ended question and 5 demographic questions (see Appendix E).

Respondents indicated their perceptions on 17 questions using a five-option Likert scale where 1=*Almost always* and 5=*Almost never*, 13 questions using a Likert scale where 1=*Strongly agree* and 5=*Strongly disagree*, and one question where 1=*Extremely comfortable* and 5=*Extremely uncomfortable*. Data collection via the online survey was conducted between October 8, 2016, and November 1, 2016. Analyses of survey data were conducted by using SPSS software for Microsoft Windows, which includes descriptive analysis and inferential analysis. Results of tests for internal consistency reliability among related themes within the related themes in the survey are presented in Chapter 4, and tables displaying results for each forced-response question appear in Appendix H

Teacher focus-group interviews. The phase of data collection involved teacher focus-group interviews. After completing analysis of survey data, questions based on survey results were added to the focus-group interview protocol. I then sent an electronic mail message on November 21, 2016, to all teachers at the participating schools inviting them to participate in a focus-group interview. Approximately 6 teachers from each school volunteered to participate; these interviews were conducted at the six selected schools at a convenient time for teachers. Each focus-group included approximately 6 participants and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Prior to beginning the interview, teachers were given time to read and sign the approved consent form and to review the interview questions and ask for clarification, if needed. See Appendix G for focus-group protocol.

The purpose of conducting focus-group interviews was to understand how teachers believe conflict is handled in their schools and to ask questions related to

responses on the TELL Kentucky Survey they completed in 2015. All teachers participating in the focus-group interviews were asked the same questions, except those specifically related to their school's TELL Kentucky Survey results.

Approval to Conduct Study

Following approval to conduct this study by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Kentucky (see Appendix B), I received permission to administer the survey from the district office of the Kentucky school district and approval from the principals of the six selected schools to survey their teachers and conduct interviews. Those who participated in any portion of the study were assured the information provided would remain confidential and anonymous to the extent possible. Prior to beginning of each focus-group, I asked that everyone protect the confidentiality of all involved by not disclosing who was present and by not sharing any portion of the comments made.

Interview Transcriptions and Data Safety Precautions

All interviews were audio recorded by me and transcribed by a professional. All interview transcriptions were kept in a secure location on my computer that is accessible only by me. No data were collected through the online survey that would identify respondents, and only I had access to data gathered through survey. Although participants in focus-group interviews knew the identity of all other participants, they were asked to protect the confidentiality of all involved by not disclosing who was present and by not sharing any portion of any comments made during the focus-group interview. No information that would disclose the identity of study participants appears in study report. Pseudonyms are used for all school names.

Data Analysis Strategies

During the first phase of the case study (Summer 2016), I conducted individual interviews with six principals just prior to the beginning of the new school year. I met with each of the principals in their private offices at their school for approximately 45-60 minutes. I reviewed the audio recordings of the principal interviews before they were professionally transcribed, which is a recommended preliminary step for analyzing qualitative data to assure accuracy of findings (Maxwell, 2005). Only participants' first names appeared on the interview transcriptions.

Analysis of interview transcriptions and documents was completed using qualitative strategies (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2011) and content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). NVivo software for qualitative research was used coding and comparing text. The documents collected from the six schools helped to clarify study participants' comments, clarify meaning of terms and activities, advance understanding, and discover insights related to the study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011).

After the completion of each interview with a principal or focus-group session, a professionally trained transcriptionist was given the audio-recorded interviews to be transcribed. I then analyzed all interview transcriptions to identify categories and themes. A coding process advised by Stake (1995) was employed: While listening to each interview recording, I highlighted important quotes and phrases on the printed transcripts and later coded the words electronically using NVivo software. The rich, thick descriptions offered by participants' voices were authenticated in the findings (Creswell, 2007) and presented in Chapter 4.

Potential Study Limitations

As the researcher for this case study, I served as the primary data-collection instrument and thus could have unintentionally included elements of researcher basis because I am currently a teacher in a Kentucky school district. Realizing this, I employed several strategies to minimize potential research bias.

While conducting this study, I attempted to minimize my personal perspectives and expectations to assure any biases I may have did not influence data collection, data analysis, or interpretation of study findings. However, during analysis of the focus-group sessions, I found that the volunteer participants were representative of teacher leaders in the six schools. Therefore, these participants could have a bias toward school leadership due to their active involvement in the decision-making activities at their schools.

Summary

The study began with an explanation of criteria used to identify study sites and how the six selected schools met requirements for evidencing high levels of teacher empowerment. Next, private interviews with principals at the six selected schools were conducted during the summer of 2016; these six principals leaders of their schools when the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey was administered. Next, all teachers at the six selected schools were invited to respond to a 37-question online during fall of 2016. Following analyses of data gathered through the principal interviews and online survey, focus-group interviews were conducted with teachers at each of the six selected schools during late fall of 2016 through early spring of 2017. Data collected were then analyzed to determine how conflict is being used constructively for promoting individual growth and organizational learning in these schools where teacher empowerment is high.

Chapter 4 opens with a discussion about unanticipated contextual changes that may have influenced study findings, followed by presentation of evidence of internal consistency among related elements with the online survey I developed. The remainder of the chapter is presentation of themes that emerged through analyses of all data collected.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This study explored how principals in six Kentucky schools with high teacher-empowerment levels use conflict as a positive force to move their schools forward. The participants for the study included principals and teachers at two high schools, two middle schools, and two elementary schools within the same district who were employed at the schools when the 2015 TELL Kentucky survey was administered. All school names are pseudonyms, as presented in Chapter 3.

Contextual Changes

During the first phase of the study, all principals at the six schools participated in 1-1 interviews conducted in their offices during the summer of 2016. The principals who were interviewed were the leaders of their schools when the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey was administered by the Kentucky Department of Education.

After the individual principal interviews, but prior to administering the online survey to teachers and conducting focus-group interviews with teachers at all six schools, principal changes occurred in three of the schools: (a) The principal at Johnson Middle School retired; (b) the principal at Samson Middle School assumed a position at the district office; and (c) the principal at Midway Elementary School moved to another elementary school to serve as the Professional Growth and Effectiveness System (PGES) coach, a position created in Kentucky public schools to support implementation of a new evaluation system for certified personnel.

The Johnson Middle School assistant principal moved into the principal position, creating little change in school culture. In the other two schools, however, interim

principals assumed the open principalships, making the transition uneasy for many teachers due to differences in the interim principals' leadership styles and due to concerns among the staff members about who would eventually fill the vacant position. When interviewing these teachers in a focus-group setting, I asked the teachers to consider the questions with regard to the person who was principal during the administration of the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey. Because data gathered through the online survey were anonymous, it is unknown the extent to which survey results may have been influenced by the changes in principals.

Online Survey

During the second phase of the study, all teachers in the six selected schools were invited by me through an electronic mail message to complete the online survey administered through Qualtrics. The survey remained open between October 8, 2016, and November 1, 2016. Among the 629 eligible teachers at the six schools, only 107 teachers completed the survey, producing a return rate of 17%. Further, among the 107 teachers who responded, 81 worked at the two elementary schools and 26 worked at the secondary schools (i.e., two middle schools, two high schools). Hence, the imbalanced survey responses made it impossible to compare subgroups based on work location. Appendix H presents analyses of the responses based on percentages among the 107 responses.

The survey contained 37 items, of which 31 were answered using the three different five-point Likert scales described in Chapter 3 as well as one open-ended question and five demographic questions (see Appendix E). When analyzing the survey, responses were disaggregated according to work location: elementary school

(Kindergarten through Grade 5) and secondary (Grade 6-Grade 12) that included both middle and high schools. This disaggregation of data was based on difference in the roles and responsibilities of teachers at the elementary level from those at the secondary level. At the elementary level, teachers are classified according to grade level taught, whereas at the middle and high school level, teachers are classified by content taught. Further, because the school structure and leadership roles assumed by middle and high school teachers are similar, grouping their responses together seemed appropriate.

The data collected through the online survey were disaggregated according to teachers' responses according to grade level taught (i.e., elementary, secondary), gender, years in education, and years at current school. There were 81 elementary teachers who responded to the survey, and 26 secondary teachers. Male teachers represented 17 of the total 107 responses, while female teachers represented 90 responses. Because the overwhelming majority of respondents were female elementary teachers, the differences in the data were not significant when disaggregated by gender or school level.

Survey-Item Internal Consistency Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were computed to test internal consistency reliability among similar scaled-response items on the survey. Table 4.1 displays the resulting coefficients, which indicate acceptable reliability rates of 0.7 or higher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Nunnally, 1978) for each set of related items on the survey.

Table 4.1 Reliability of Constructive Conflict Items

Relevance	Number of Items (Question Numbers)	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients
Trust	5 (2, 7, 9, 23 28)	.707
Commitment	6 (5, 8, 10, 18, 29, 30)	.732
Accountability	5 (4, 8, 12, 24, 25)	.742
Teacher Empowerment	4 (11, 16, 21, 26)	.884
Risk-Safe Environment	5 (1, 6, 13, 14, 21)	.737
Vision	5 (10, 17, 19, 22, 27)	.730
Conflict	5 (3, 13, 15, 20, 21)	.719

Results based on survey response rate of 17% (i.e., 107 teachers out of 629 total teachers).

Emergent Themes

Analyzing all data gathered from the principals through individual interviews and the teachers through the online survey and focus-group interviews revealed four broad themes: (a) teacher leadership and empowerment, (b) teacher engagement and decision making, (c) risk-safe environment, and (d) perceptions of conflict. The findings from interviews are presented below in four sections under the theme titles. At the end of each major section is a discussion of relevant survey results; tables displaying survey results appear in Appendix H.

Teacher Leadership and Empowerment

The six schools were selected due to their high level of teacher empowerment as evidenced by results of the 2015 TELL Kentucky survey. Therefore, it was not surprising that teacher leadership and empowerment surfaced as a theme in the analysis of the data.

Principal Perspectives

The principals were asked several questions about teacher empowerment in order to further understand the TELL Kentucky Survey data. The questions were generated from the literature review, as well as questions that arose from analysis of the TELL Kentucky Survey. The conversation that followed each of these questions evidenced how teacher leadership is represented in each of the schools. The principals were asked, *Is teacher empowerment an important component in your school culture? Please explain your response.* While all six principals agreed that teacher empowerment is important to school culture, each had different views about how teacher empowerment is represented in their schools. The Logan High School principal explained how he encourages teachers to share their skills with their peers through professional development opportunities.

> We believe strongly that the best PD [professional development] lies within the skill sets of the teachers that are in this building. My job as leader is to facilitate opportunities for collaboration among teachers so they can have opportunities to share their work. We have 140 teachers at our high school, and sometimes their efforts go unshared. Sharing contributes to teacher empowerment because they feel valued and feel like they are contributing to something larger than just the work in their classroom.

The Davidson High School principal had a completely different interpretation of how teacher empowerment exists in her school. She described how she solicits teacher input when making changes, such as adding copiers to the workrooms and increasing supervision in the halls.

> I'm starting my seventh year [at Davidson High School] . . . the first week I was here, I gave teachers a survey to find out where we needed to start. I [also] asked them four questions about the school's strengths and weaknesses and the teachers' needs. . . . I read [their responses] and determined my next steps based on those surveys. Whatever they mentioned, whether it was that we needed more copiers or more teacher leaders or more supervision, I tried to address it.

She also spoke about the results of that first survey and how she worked to help teachers based on their responses. She stated that her job was to assess the needs of the teachers and meet those needs.

Both middle school principals, provided very similar responses to the question, indicating they both envisioned the concept of teacher empowerment in the same way. The Samson Middle School principal spoke about how important it is to give teachers the opportunity to provide input on school decisions. When asked if teacher empowerment is an important component in the school culture, he responded, "Absolutely," and then shared how teachers have a voice in any decision that the administrators make.

> All staff have input into any major decision that we make. Team leaders are heavily involved, [as well as] department chairs, if any policies are being revised. Changes to the ways we do things are brought to teacher committees. All teachers and staff that are affected have a chance to give feedback. Then [the proposal] brought back to us [to review]. . . . It is a couple of months' process in any decision that we make because we want to make sure we get everybody's feedback. In the end the decision rests with the administration, but we take everybody's feedback into account because like I say all the time, "I'm one person and you're 50." I can't think of everything so it's always important to hear different voices and [gain] feedback because I know that I haven't thought of everything I often say, "Oh yeah, I haven't thought of that." Teacher empowerment is a vital part of this school for sure.

The Johnson Middle School principal echoed his colleague's response and talked about how crucial it is for the principal to create an atmosphere where the teachers know that their voices are part of decision making.

> It is very important because we try to create a climate where teachers feel valued. Not only do I want them to be valued, but [also] this place is too big for me to be the expert on everything. So, we try to create a climate where leaders feel like they are part of a leadership team, and they are part of a leadership team. We believe in having multiple people to the table any time that we have an issue [to address]. It is never about me as the principal being the deciding voice. . . . I think my teachers realize that I am not the boss: I am one of them, and that's what I've tried to do my whole time as being a leader. [I often tell my teachers], "I'm not your boss, I'm part of your team." And I think they realize that and feel

comfortable in that. They feel valued, and they know I am going to listen to them.

The elementary school principals were also asked the same question about teacher empowerment. The principal from Victory Elementary explained that teachers are empowered at her school through a highly-structured system of committees that includes representation from all staff groups.

> [Teachers] are the ones in the classroom doing the work every day so they need to be the ones making the decisions. We have a very structured committee system that makes all the decisions, and we also have a leadership team. It really goes two ways. We may talk about it during leadership [team meetings] and say this really is something that [a specific] committee should decide. The leadership team has someone from every team on it. The teachers choose who will be on the leadership team. Every group is represented.

The principal at Midway Elementary answered this question by saying, "Absolutely, we are very transparent with everything we do. The leadership [team] recognizes the strengths that the teachers have and lets them showcase who they are and what they do."

The second question asked during the principal interviews continued with a focus on teacher empowerment. They were asked, *How does your position as principal affect the level of teacher empowerment at your school?* Several principals explained in detail how they use their role to ensure that teachers feel emboldened to share in the decision-making processes that guide their schools. The Logan High School principal spoke about sharing his goals with staff and finding opportunities for the teachers to grow professionally.

> I share my own professional growth goals with the staff. I think that level of authenticity helps create that culture towards a willingness to get better. The other piece is finding opportunities for teachers to do things that will allow them to grow. Presenting a topic at a staff meeting or leading a club, all those opportunities are opportunities for growth. It is my responsibility to find those opportunities and connect them with the teachers that need to grow in those areas. I think awareness and knowledge of staff is imperative. It is just as important for

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me to know about my teachers as it is for my teachers to know about their students . . . that respect and rapport category doesn't just stay in isolation in the classroom. It extends to my office, and I need to be well versed about my teachers and what their needs are. I can't empower them if I don't know where they are.

The Davidson High school principal told me that when she became principal, she "set up little boxes in all of the copy rooms so staff can drop notes in about concerns, which is if they don't want to take it directly to a faculty member. [It is often] the same type things, but we address these things and try to make changes."

When asked how his role as principal affects the level of teacher empowerment, the Samson Middle School principal told me about the structures that are in place for teachers to give feedback during conversations with others.

I think just by listening to them and having one-on-one conversations with them. Small group, big group and, for instance we meet every other Thursday just to talk about data. Every other Tuesday we have staff meeting where we sometimes just do "housecleaning," sometimes that time is to give out a big initiative from the district or something that we are working on here at the school. We kind of divide it up so I think just by being a part of them, that's how I see myself.

In response to the question about how he affects the level of teacher empowerment in his role at Johnson Middle School principal, he stated, "I have to be the driving force behind it that is for sure."

The Midway Elementary School principal said that her role can affect the level of teacher empowerment if she knows what her teachers need. She said that understanding comes from doing observations and having conversations with the teachers and from observing professional learning community [PLC] meetings. She said that ultimately, "you have got to know [the teachers] your building. I think you have to know what expertise they each have."

The principal at Victory Elementary School shared that her vision of teacher empowerment includes the principal as the "director of information." She explained that there are committees in place to help make decisions and that ideas are vetted by many people before coming to fruition.

> A time ago, I had a superintendent that said, "Everyone thinks that people come to you for an answer but the answer can be – I don't know or let's think about it or talk about it." I rarely am the "yes or no" person. I am the director of information. When someone comes [to me] and says, "I really want to do this type of math," I tell [her or him] that the student achievement committee needs to look at it, or team leads need to look at that. I rarely make a decision where I say, "We are going to do that." I run it by the team leads, committees and the school improvement committees. By the time we decide on something, it has been through multiple committees and teachers have heard it multiple times in several different venues.

Teacher Perspectives

Teacher focus groups were conducted at each of the six selected schools. Questions related to teacher empowerment and teacher leadership were also asked during those interviews. Teachers were asked, *Are there opportunities for teachers to fill leadership roles in your school?* All teachers in the Logan High School focus group agreed that there are multiple opportunities for leadership on committees and leadership teams. One teacher noted, "In a high school, there is a need for leaders in many different areas, and we are all encouraged to serve in our area of interest." The other teachers in the group, who were all tenured teachers, agreed with that statement.

The teachers at Davidson High School represented a mix of new, non-tenured teachers and tenured teachers. The new teachers explained that there are many opportunities for leadership at their school, but the positions are filled with veteran teachers; further, the new teachers at Davidson High School feel that they are expected to keep their mouths shut for the first few years at the school. One second-year teacher

noted, "We can express our opinions to our department chair, but we know she is aligned with administration, so our concerns won't make it out of that meeting." She explained further that leadership positions are filled by the teachers who fall in line with administrative directives.

The middle school focus-group participants were asked the same question. Samson Middle School teachers echoed their principal's answer: There are leadership openings on committees, and teachers who serve as department chairs want to serve in those capacities. The focus group at Johnson Middle School was composed of tenured teachers. When asked about opportunities for leadership, the teachers gave many examples. "We have a leadership team, and membership is not based on seniority; it is based on teacher interest," one teacher said. Another teacher noted that she was able to co-chair the mathematics department during her second year of teaching and served as a team leader during her third year in the classroom. A new teacher said administrators at Samson have always been open to and comfortable with encouraging teachers to take leadership roles, even early-career teachers. One teacher added, "Not necessarily just with the leadership team . . . if teachers have suggestions about things they would like to implement in their classroom, we are supported by the [school leaders]. I think that helps teachers to feel empowered and feel comfortable taking risks in their classrooms."

When teachers at Midway Elementary School were asked about opportunities for leadership, they explained that the principal knows how to use their strengths and often taps them for leadership opportunities. One teacher described how the principal recognized her talent for analyzing Measures of Academic Progress [MAP] data, and handed the reins to her.

After two or three years of MAP testing, she realized that the classroom was the point of impact and realized that we knew how to use the data. She asked me to begin going to the [district-level] MAP meetings and the meetings at school started to be [about] application. I did our MAP data for four or five years. It was just one of those things where [the former principal] saw a strength and was willing to hand [it off to a teachers]. It wasn't housed in the administration [office]. There are a lot of things [she delegated] because she knew how to quickly identify people's strengths. She knew if she delegated something, it would be handled.

Another Midway teacher gave an example of a teacher who took over the leadership role for ordering all of the resources for teachers.

[Every year] the principal gets an itemized list to review [about] where our money is spent. She looks at it and approves it. She trusts that teachers know what they need. [A few years ago] the principal found a teacher who was a good communicator and a respected teacher and delegated the job of ordering the resources for teachers. Just about everything in the building has been run that way.

When posed the same question, teachers at Victory Elementary School talked about opportunities for leadership by serving on school-governance committees and program-review committees. They felt that decisions were ultimately made by the principal because she had a "vision of the big picture." However, the teachers agreed that the principal made it possible for teachers to serve in leadership positions and assert their opinions.

Online Survey Results: Teacher Empowerment

Four questions on the survey were directly related to teacher empowerment. Analysis of data collected through the survey prompt, *My principal solicits teachers' opinions during meetings*, revealed that the majority of teachers at all six schools were almost always or frequently asked their opinions by their principals. It was interesting to see that less than 10% of all respondents say that their principal either *seldom* or *almost never* solicits their opinions during meetings. Nearly two-thirds of all teachers indicated

agreement with the prompt *During meetings with our principal, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions, even at the risk of disagreement.* Teachers at all levels responded positively to the final teacher empowerment prompt, *When teachers at my school meet with our principal, he/she values the ideas of each teacher.* Over 70% of all teachers strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

Teacher Engagement and Decision Making

While interviewing principals, they told me they were committed to involving teachers in the management and decision making of the school. Their perceptions about teacher leadership and decision were embedded within commentary about teacher leadership and empowerment. When teachers were asked questions about their influence in school decision making, they asserted that there were many opportunities for their involvement. Thus, only teachers' comments about their engagement in leadership and decision making are reported below.

The second question asked during in the teacher interviews was, *Do teachers affect decision making at your school?* The teachers at Logan High School provided several examples when teachers were integral participants in decision making. For example, they explained that when students were sent to in-school suspension [SAFE], classwork was sent with the student; however, there was no method for the SAFE room monitor to communicate with the teachers about whether or not the student completed the assigned work while at SAFE. A teacher saw this issue as critical and brought it to the attention of the administrators who then asked her to develop a plan for remedying this problem. The plan was implemented and has solved the issues. The teachers in the focus group provided several other instances when they were given opportunities to provide

input on major decisions. Overall, the teachers felt that they were able to make their voices heard through committees and speaking directly to administrators and that their voices were considered during decision-making process.

The teachers at Davidson High School evidenced differences of opinion when answering this question. The non-tenured teachers felt that they could speak to those they trusted, but they perceived their opinions were not taken into consideration because they were too "new" to matter. The veteran teachers felt that the administrators made an effort to hear their voices, but they made many decisions that did not reflect the opinions or perspectives of the teachers. All teachers in the focus group, however, agreed that they had decision-making power in their own classrooms and that their principal trusted them "to do the right thing in the classroom with their students."

The teachers in the Johnson Middle School focus group believed there were multiple opportunities for them to participate in decision making. Each teacher agreed that the principal reaches out to others before making decisions. "Every Monday, the administration meets and things triage down," one teacher said. "They meet and talk about things that need to be discussed in leadership [meetings]." According to another focus-group participant, because a teacher from every team serves on the leadership group, "There is a chain of command, but [the principal] doesn't make any decisions without consulting several different tiers before rolling things out." Another teacher noted that their principal consults them "not necessarily just with the leadership team" but also with "teachers [who] have suggestions about things they would like to implement in their classroom. We are supported by the leadership."

Teachers at Samson Middle School explained that decisions are reviewed by committees prior to being made. "Every teacher has the opportunity to weigh in on topics before decisions are made, if they want to do that," one teacher said. "I think our principal values our feedback and genuinely wants to hear from us before he makes decisions. I like that about our school."

The focus group at Midway Elementary School thought their opinions were valued as well. One teacher explained why:

> [The principal] truly values our input. She doesn't always go with it, but she hears us out and then she shows us research [that supports her decision]. Then she will listen to us and find more research. Most of her decision making is based on research and our professional opinions.

The other teachers agreed that the principal considers multiple sources before making decisions, and they were appreciative of her diligence in trying to make the best decision possible for the students and teachers at Midway. According to teachers at Victory Elementary School, instructional decision making is primarily left to the teachers. One teacher stated,

> There is a lot of trust in instructional decision making, but you are held accountable for the data. It's pretty much like you can do what you think is best and if your data shows that it is working, great.

Teachers in this focus group agreed that major changes are discussed in committees before decisions are made. "Even if the decision is not what I wanted, I still trust that the principal is doing what's best for the school," one teacher stated, "eventually we all realize why a decision was made and know it was for the best."

Online Survey Results: Trust

Five survey prompts were related to trust. When analyzing results from the survey prompt, *Teachers in my school solicit one another's opinions during meetings,* 72% of

teachers answered that this occurs at least *frequently*. Only 21% of respondents replied

that they *seldom* or *never* offer unprovoked, constructive feedback to one another. Fifty-

eight percent of respondents said they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the prompt,

Teachers in my school are unguarded and genuine with each other.

Risk-Safe Environment

The six selected schools were chosen because the 2015 TELL Kentucky survey

results indicated that these school was high in teacher empowerment. The survey results

also signified a risk-safe environment at all six schools as measured by trust in the school

leaders and the value of staff. During the interviews, I asked principals and teachers

questions relating to risk-safe environments. The online survey, which was completed by

107 teachers, provided additional data supporting the premise that there are risk-safe

environments at the schools as well.

Principal Perspectives

Principals were asked, *Do you think teachers feel comfortable giving their honest

opinions to you during meetings?* All principals interviewed for this study responded by

saying that they desperately hope that all staff members feel comfortable giving their

honest opinions to them during meetings. Most believe they do, although a high school

principal expressed doubt that all staff members feel secure enough to do so. The middle

school and elementary school principals felt sure that their staff expresses their honest

opinions in meetings.

The Logan High School principal explained that he thinks his staff of 140

certified employees and 80 classified employees feel secure bringing concerns to him, or

another administrator.

> I think they feel comfortable coming to me and if not me, someone in the building. We have a lot of systems in place. We are a village. I'd like to think that at some level, [for example] a PLC or an assistant principal who evaluates teachers, that there are people in the building they feel comfortable going to if there is a problem. I hope that's the case.

When the Davidson High School principal was asked the same question, she responded: "Over time, they have grown to understand that they can share their opinions with me. It's okay if we don't agree. But there are some who still feel like they can't and I think there will always be."

When the Samson Middle School principal was asked if he thinks his teachers feel comfortable giving him their honest opinions during meetings, he answered the question affirmatively. He then added that because he was an instructional coach at the school prior to being named principal, he had developed relationships that withstood his transition for teacher to principal.

> Absolutely, I do know that . . . it's almost like 100%. I think it is just because in my old role [as an instructional coach], they could always use me as a sounding board or ask me questions and I could help them along. I used to say, "I come to you in peace." I think they feel very comfortable [doing that now]. When this door is open, there is a line of people [to see me]. It never stops, but that's okay. But, yes, they feel extremely comfortable coming to me and again, I think that was part of our high scores on the survey. I'm an open book. I don't hold anything back. That allows for some level of comfort to come to me.

The Johnson Middle School principal answered by simply stating, "I do." He then explained that the staff have been around him long enough to know his temperament, and thus, he believes that "they know exactly how I'm going to react." He assured me that he would never react in a way that would embarrass a staff member or make them feel any less than what they are.

Both elementary school principals had been serving their schools in their current role for many years, and neither hesitated in responding to the question. The Victory

Elementary School principal answered with a condition, "Yes, sometimes maybe too much. I am not going to say, that's the dumbest idea I've ever heard of or we can't do that. I'm going to listen." She explained further that her staff talks about ideas and determines whether or not they will work for the school. Likewise, the Midway Elementary School principal thinks teachers and staff members feel very comfortable in giving her their sincere thoughts, asserting that she has "a very open door." Because she was the assistant principal at the school before moving into the principal position, teachers would discuss things with her before going to the principal. This strengthened her connections with staff before she eventually moved into the principal role. She believes that creating a risk-safe environment is "all built upon relationships."

The principals were also asked, *Do you think teachers feel comfortable giving their honest opinions to each other during meetings?* The answers to this question did not emerge quickly from the principals. Several paused and thought carefully before answering. The Logan High School principal viewed the positive and negative attributes of giving sincere opinions.

> I don't know because part of being a professional is not lying, but being respectful is not always sharing everything. I like to think we have a culture [in which teachers feel] safe and know that it is something they could do if they feel strongly about it. I would say, "Yes, they are comfortable sharing their concerns [with me]." I think that is important. The PLC structures tend to provide a really safe place [because] they are small and intimate. It allows teachers to share ideas and data and do so in a safe environment. I would like to think they can share. To some degree, it is also important to temper that so they don't share an opinion that could be offensive to the environment.

The Davidson High School principal perceives that "some teachers are hesitant to share what they think because it may not be what the department chair thinks or what I think." She added that "it's okay if they don't agree because we aren't always going to agree."

The Samson Middle School principal shared that he thought most staff members come to him with issues. After reflecting a moment long, he added, "There are pockets [of teachers], and I know who they are, that don't feel comfortable doing that. For the most part, everyone gives their opinions and feedback, in a group to people." He said that the communication is very open at Samson Middle School. Interestingly, the principal at Johnson Middle School provided a similar answer. He considered the entire staff population in his response, stating that he believes most staff members communicate their opinions freely.

> Probably about 90% of them will . . . [and] a few just don't. That's the nature of people. But about 90% of the people in this building feel pretty good about being able to express their opinions and likes and dislikes.

The Victory Elementary School principal responded, "Yes, I do," and then acknowledged that some employees would say they do not feel comfortable enough to speak freely. She explained that there is a perception among some staff members that they cannot express their opinions openly—yet these are some of the most vocal teachers at the school. The Midway Elementary School principal explained that she thinks most teachers are willing to communicate their opinions openly, then quickly added "depending on their personalities, some are more willing than others."

Online Survey Results: Risk-Safe Environment

Five prompts on the survey specifically addressed the concept of a risk-safe environment. For the first survey prompt, *Teachers in my school willingly give praise and credit to colleagues,* all teachers answered that they at least *occasionally* give praise and credit to colleagues. A significant number of teachers in all school levels reported that at least *occasionally* difficult issues are discussed in meetings with the principal and

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that their principal encourages staff members to share ideas, even if they are dissimilar.

The last survey prompt specifically related to risk-safe environment was, *During meetings with our principal, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions, even at the risk of causing disagreement.* Sixty-six percent of teachers said they *agree* or *strongly agree* with this statement.

Conflict Resolution between Self and Others

My four guiding research questions focused on how a principal and teachers react to conflict and how conflict is used as a constructive force in the school. This section presents commentary generated through a question posed to the principals and then to teachers during a focus group about handling conflict between self and others. The next major section presents responses to a question about conflict resolution between two staff members.

Principal Perspectives

The first question related to this concept posed to the principals was, *If conflict occurs between another staff member and you, how do you handle it?* The principals all answered similarly, saying that the primary goal of dealing with conflict was to communicate with the other staff members and listen to each other. However, each principal had a different point of view about how this is accomplished.

The Logan High School principal responded immediately: "Communication. I think you have to be a really good listener in this job. I have to listen to them, understand where the conflict is coming from." The Davidson High School principal explained that she avoids shouting when there is a problem: "I'm very calm and listen and try to understand where they are coming from with whatever [the issue creating conflict] might

be." Nonetheless, she was aware that there are staff members who do not come to her with concerns.

> Some teachers feel like they can't approach administration, [no matter who is the leader], but my door is always open. . . . I don't say make an appointment. I stop what I'm doing and put my pencil down or take my hands off the keyboard and give them the attention they need. If they need to see me, they need to see me. As far as having a major conflict, we really haven't [had any]. We usually sit down and talk things through. Now I've had to put people on corrective action plans, and I have had to meet with the superintendent [about issues]. I've had to do all those things, but it's improved our relationship almost. Bottom line is that I listen to them and see where they are coming from and I try to meet them halfway.

The Samson Middle School principal explained that his method for dealing with conflict is to sit down and talk with staff members. He thinks that talking face-to-face is the best way to advance a conversation and come to a compromise.

> I just sit down with them and say, "You know me and you know where my heart is coming from . . . Why do you see it this way? This is why I see it this way. Can we work on some kind of compromise here? We have to do what's best for the students and the school." When I approach a conflict, that's how I approach it. I say, "Let's just talk, because emails get misconstrued. You can take [words] two or three different ways. . . it's best to just do it face to face with me and just say what's going on, how can we fix this, what's best for the students? Can we reach a compromise so we are doing the right thing?" That's how I approach it.

The Johnson Middle School principal asserted that listening to one another is the key to resolving conflict. He is committed to finding common ground and doing what is best for the entire school community.

> We listen to one another, and [the staff members] know that if there is an issue, they can come to this office, and they're going to be heard. We try to resolve things together. Again, it's never about it's my way or the highway. We try to compromise. I can't say that we've had a lot of conflict. In the nine years that I've been here, it seems like it's been the "perfect marriage" really . . . I think it's because [staff members] know I will listen to them. They know [what is said is] going to stay in this office. It's going to be confidential, and we're going to resolve the issue and do what's best for our school. [What we decide may] not necessarily be what's best for me or what's best for them, but we're going to do what's best for our kids and our school.

The Victory Elementary School principal had a similar response to the principal at Johnson Middle School. However, she noted that her school community includes members with strong and differing opinions, which makes it imperative to listen to one another and find common ground.

> We just sit down and talk about it. I listen to them. We talk about it and come to some type of resolution. We really don't have a lot of conflict, [but] we have strong opinions, very strong opinions. My teachers are good and strong.

The principal at Midway Elementary School answered the question by expressing her personal views about conflict and difficult conversations. In resolving conflicts, she begins with a conversation with the involved teachers or staff members. She admitted that the conflict does not always get resolved during the first meeting or that the resolution does not always favor those who present the issues. However, she repeatedly mentioned that she believes conflict needs to be confronted before it spreads throughout the school community.

> I'm a no-bones-about-it girl. I'm a firm believer that you sometimes have to have tough conversations. It's not good to avoid conflict, [but instead] it's good to have conversations. You can have a conversation [or two] with a staff member who is upset [and needs to] vent. I can listen to what they say [because] I think my teachers need to feel like they are being heard, just like in any relationship. . . It might not work out in their favor, but we can be mutually open [during] the conversation. To be honest, we aren't a school with lots of conflict, but there is always some [conflict] with 60 staff members.

When teacher or staff members are upset, she reiterated that she finds time to meet with the individuals to "validate their concerns and let them be heard" because not addressing "negativity can be like cancer." She asserted that staff members at her school address conflict directly, rather than letting it "build" into something that is "unhealthy." Her

closing remark related to this interview question was, "Over the years, we've have not had tons of conflict."

Teacher Perspectives

Participants in the focus groups were asked the same question *If conflict occurs between another staff member and you, how do you handle it?* Teachers at both high schools responded similarly. At Logan High School, they go to the instructional leader of their department to get assistance with a problem. If needed, the instructional leader helps teachers work through the problem. A teacher at Davidson High School responded, "The proper chain of command would be to go to your department chair [who] would remediate it." She then added that department has had some communication issues and some blow ups. A new teacher said, "People who are tenured go straight to administration if they have issues, but you are discouraged from speaking up if you are not tenured." A tenured teacher at Davidson High School agreed that new teachers probably feel unheard and admitted that having seniority really is the key to being heard.

A Samson Middle School teacher said she would go to the principal if she had an issue because the principal is very open to talking about anything and has always been interested in solving the problem. She remarked as well that she had worked at a school where the principal avoided conflict, which created a school culture entirely different from the one at Samson. At her previous school, there was no confidentiality, and conflict spread "like a fire." Thus, this teacher was grateful to be in a school where it was important for conflict to be resolved. Based on teacher comments, the culture at Samson Middle School appears similar to that at Johnson Middle School. During that focus-group interview, a teacher talked about the way the principal handles conflict: "Teachers feel

comfortable going to the principal. She has an open door policy. People are always in her office." The teacher added that people typically go to the principal if they have an issue they cannot resolve themselves. She said she does know of any situation where a person did not feel comfortable talking with an administrator, "even if it is their team leader [regularly reports] to administration."

A teacher at Victory Elementary School asserted that there is little interpersonal conflict at her school. She described a time when she had a problem she could not resolve alone.

> I went to the principal and assistant principal. I didn't know how to address [the issue], but knew I couldn't do it anymore. They helped me craft a conversation to [use with] my team. [The issue] was solved quickly and confidentially.

During the focus-group interview at Midway Elementary School, a teacher stated that conflict is handled by the principal when it impacts students.

> When conflict gets to the point that it affects kids, we take it to the principal and say, "Listen, we've had this conversation and this conversation and the kids are not getting x, y and z because of it. I need you to fix it." Otherwise, she trusts us to professionally take care of it. There isn't a lot of tattle telling and running behind each other's back.

Another teacher noted that Midway Elementary School is "a gossip free environment. [The principal] isn't afraid of conflict." The teachers explained that their principal practiced "reciprocal accountability" and expected her staff to do that as well. Another teacher said, "She used those words constantly." Whenever an issue was taken to the principal, she would ask first, "Have you talked to them about it?" When I told her, "I've had several conversations, the principal knew I had exhausted all the options." Another teacher at the school recounted a time when she needed the principal's help. She told the

principal, "I had tried everything, and this is really bothering me, I am coming to you for help." The teacher explained that the principal handled it, but she was tough.

> She will engage with people if needed. But people listen to her. She commands a level of respect. If she comes to you with an issue, it is an issue that needs to be taken care of now.

All teachers participating in that focus group agreed that the principal makes every decision based on the best interest of the kids.

Conflict Resolution between Staff Members

As above, this section presents findings generated through a question posed to the principals during their private interviews and then to teachers during their focus-group interviews. However, this time the question focuses on how they handle conflict between other members of their school community. The intent of posing these questions was to learn if conflict is used constructively in the six schools with high levels of teacher empowerment.

Principal Perspectives

The principals were asked, *If conflict occurs between two staff members, how do you handle it?* The Logan High School principal immediately responded, "Depends on the situation." He then explained that managing conflict between adults is challenging because the dispute is sometimes personal. Nonetheless, he has "an expectation of professionalism by all accounts." He continued to explain that his school has a very interesting method of diffusing conflict called "bury it." He explained that it has worked in his school on many occasions.

> Sometimes, if conflict cannot be resolved, one of our number one interventions is time. I tell the staff member, "You all don't talk about this, don't talk to each other [about it], and don't engage in conversations about this dispute with other colleagues. We are going to bury it at this time." After time [has passed], maybe

there will be an opportunity that we come back and address it. A lot of times, I have expectations that staff members resolve their disputes between themselves: "You both are adults, you both are professionals, and it is my expectation that this [issue does] not disrupt what you are doing in the building." If I have to intervene, there are more formalized methods of intervention that I can apply. Fortunately, I have not had to do that very often.

The principal attributed the low level of conflict in his school to the expectations that are set forth every year. He described the evidence that supports his claim.

I think you have set an expectation of professionalism and create a culture [that is] is positive and people enjoy coming to work. One of the pieces of data that I celebrate the most from the TELL Kentucky survey is the teacher- efficacy [prompt], *My school is a good place to work.* I think that we were at 90%. I'm critical, so I say, that means 10% of my staff doesn't like coming to work every day. I think if that is in place, then conflict is manageable. If you have a significant number of teachers who do not want to come to work, you are going to experience more conflict.

After I asked the same question, the principal at Davidson High School paused for a moment to reflect and then said, "That has happened." She explained that she sometimes has "to put adults on a behavior management plan" and provided an example.

[The teachers] were on opposite ends of the building but in the same department. I I had to say, "You stay on your end of the building, and you stay on your end of the building," [which is] almost like a behavior management plan for adults. I've had to bring them together and put ground rules in place. In time, they will come back [to me] and say, "That was ridiculous." Everyone reaches a point, and it's usually at the end of the school year, the end of the semester, or right before spring break.

Interestingly, the principal at Samson Middle School has experienced the same thing among teachers at his school. He explained that he has learned that he cannot be the mediator and thus requests professional help to the school when needed.

I'm not trying to be a mediator. I tried it when two staff members were having a conflict. I had to sit down with the both of them and say, "You guys have been friends and coworkers for a decade or more and worked closely together." I thought it would be really easy just to mediate [their differences], but it was *not* easy. Now I know to get somebody who has mediation skills to sit down with people and just work it out. I can be a part of [the mediation process] to give my

input and how I see things. But as far as me being the mediator, I learned the hard way, I can't do that. Plus, I'm not objective because I know both of them. . . .I'm not impartial, and I can see both sides most of the time. It's hard to mediate when you say, "I can see your point [to one], and I can see your point [to the other]." It doesn't help them at all. I try to get someone who knows what they are doing to work it out with the two staff members.

When asked the same question, the Johnson Middle School principal said that most of the time he tells his staff member to solve the issue between the two of them. However, if the issue is brought to his attention, he listens to them and attempts to resolve it.

I encourage them to talk and to listen to each other and hopefully we can get it resolved that way. If we can't, then we have to go through the proper channels to find the resources we need or the people we need to help us resolve the issue. We've had to do that a couple times with grievances. Most of the time, our people have a little misunderstanding, and we are able, as adults, to sit down and resolve it. We haven't had to get involved [with outsiders] very much, but there have been a couple times.

Somewhat interestingly, the other two principals engaged directly in conflict resolution. For example, the principal at Victory Elementary School promptly responded that she expects all staff members to know the procedures for addressing conflict. She said, "If [the issue] is instructional, it [is resolved] through the committees." She perceives her role is to serve as "the facilitator" for conflict resolution. At Midway Elementary School, the principal responds to conflict by calling a meeting and acting as mediator. She requires that the parties treat each other with respect.

At times, I meet with them separately and then bring them together—I've done it both ways. We aren't all going to love each other. I tell the kids [the same thing] every single day . . . "Everybody has to be a classmate, [but] you don't have to be best friends. We have to treat each other with respect". [The same applies to the adults.] We have to listen to each other, but that doesn't mean we have to be friends or go out after work.

This principal staunchly believes that conflict can be resolved or avoided "as long as we act collegially" and "have respect for each other."

Online Survey Results: Conflict

Five survey prompts specifically targeted toward conflict. Analysis of data

gathered through the survey prompt, *Teachers in my school point out one another's*

unproductive behaviors, revealed teachers at all six schools were somewhat hesitant to

point out their peers' unproductive behaviors. One limitation of the survey was that

respondents could not indicate whether they believe that it is positive or negative attribute

of a school for teachers to point out one another's unproductive behaviors. However,

there is evidence within the data generated that in a risk-safe environment for teachers to

feel safe enough to even occasionally point out one another's unproductive behaviors.

The final conflict-related survey prompt was, *Does conflict with work colleagues*

make you uncomfortable? Only 38% of teachers felt extremely or slightly comfortable

with conflict. Over 50% of were slightly or extremely uncomfortable with conflict.

Question 32 on the online survey asked respondents to explain their answer to

Question 31. Many teachers responded saying they are not comfortable with conflict

because it makes the work environment difficult. However, one elementary teacher

responded, "Sometimes conflict is necessary for change to occur, but I never seek it out

and I don't enjoy it." Another elementary teacher wrote, "I don't like conflict but realize

it is an opportunity for discussion and improved communication if it is handled

correctly."

Many secondary teachers pointed out that while conflict is sometimes

uncomfortable, it is unavoidable. For example, a secondary teacher responded, "No one

likes conflict, but a certain degree is inevitable when people work closely together."

Another wrote, "Conflict is not a comfortable situation. Any person should feel some

level of discomfort when facing conflict. It does not however mean that conflict is unproductive or negative." The majority of secondary teachers avoid conflict in their buildings because it can become personal. One teacher explained, "When the source of the conflict stems from personality conflicts, I am especially uncomfortable." However, there were those who saw conflict as potentially constructive saying, "It is necessary for success."

When asked to explain their answers to Question 31, respondents pointed out that conflict cannot be avoided completely. One respondent answered, "Teachers [at his school] take everything so personally. I think they have difficulty distinguishing personal and professional." The tendency for people to take conflict personally was a common response. A teacher wrote,

> At my school, we treat each other respectfully and can agree to disagree. We try to keep the end goal in mind and support each other in figuring out the best way to achieve that goal. If we disagree, we discuss the pros, cons, what ifs and get second opinions. We also let the situation "cool down" and discuss rationally after we have thought about it deeply.

Only a few respondents indicated that they were completely comfortable with conflict. A teacher added a caveat: "I am extremely comfortable when conflict arises, because I trust and respect my colleagues and receive/expect that same respect from them." Another wrote, "Sometimes conflict happens, but people don't hold a grudge. It's uncomfortable. There might be apologies or a discussion, and then we move on." One teacher wrote,

> I don't have tenure, and so I worry that conflict with certain teachers who have a great deal of influence with the principal might get me pink slipped. I also avoid conflict and often bite my tongue rather than voice an opinion that is unpopular with colleagues because it's difficult enough to teach middle school without also being in conflict with my colleagues.

Another early-career teacher at a secondary school responded,

> Some of the teachers who have been in the school longer are resentful of the teachers who have either been there less time or are adjusting to changes well. Those teachers who are still teaching in the older style refuse to change and are often aggressive with those willing to adjust their practice.

A third new teacher explained,

> I am young, so I feel like my opinions are often undervalued by older staff members. Therefore, I find conflict at work troubling because I feel like I am sometimes not listened to even when I have evidence to support my positions.

Comments by experienced teachers suggested that school culture influences their response to conflict among colleagues. Most responses provided by teachers with 6-10 years of experience in education were similar to this one: "I try not make waves, but I will still say something if it is significant." Many teachers with 11-15 years of experience reported that conflict with colleagues was uncomfortable. One teacher wrote, "I don't like conflict, especially with those that I work with." Another explained, "When you have to see someone day in and day out, it is uncomfortable to be in conflict with a colleague." However, an experienced teacher with skill in conflict resolution asserted, "No one enjoys conflict. I feel I have the skills to navigate conflict but it's not the most comfortable situation."

Teachers with more than 16 years of experience had similar responses. One teacher responded, "I try to avoid conflict as I do not like it. When I am in conflict with a peer, I will generally try to resolve the situation quickly, often giving in to their side of the issue." Another wrote, "Conflict is never a fun thing for me. Sometimes there are disagreements with the staff in our building. Usually we get over pretty quick."

Teachers with more than 16 years of experience provided more lengthy responses. For example, an experienced teacher described causes and effects related to conflict.

Conflict can cause lack of communication and sometimes causes blame being placed on one party before both parties have a chance to mutually work out differences, especially if this occurs when staff members have not had time to work with each other for long.

Another explained, "I am not uncomfortable. It is never pleasant to have conflict but, it is necessary at times. I am okay working through a situation." A third veteran teacher viewed conflict as an opportunity for growth: "I don't like conflict or for others to be upset, but recognize it is part of growth."

The data gathered through the online survey overwhelming pointed to the fact that most people are at least slightly uncomfortable with conflict. However, several people pointed out that conflict can provide an opportunity for growth and change.

Using Conflict as a Constructive Force

During the individual interviews with principals and focus-group sessions with teachers at the same six schools, participants were asked, *Do you believe that conflict can be a constructive force in schools? Please explain your answer.* All six principals responded that conflict was unavoidable—and under the right conditions, conflict could be constructive. Among the teachers participating in the six focus groups, that question did not evoke universal consensus.

Principal Perspectives

Surprisingly, the principals were not aligned to the type of school they lead or to their gender or age, but rather to their personal comfort with conflict. When asked whether conflict can be a constructive force in schools, the Logan High School principal responded by saying, "Yes. I've learned the most when I've been pushed to extend my thinking or defend my beliefs." He added that conflict can support learning: "I love

[conflict] when I see students challenged in that regard. It extends student learning." He also admitted that conflict can be difficult when it becomes personal.

> I use the word *professionalism* a lot. It speaks to how we manage conflict. A lot of times our work is emotional and personal, [and] that pushes us sometimes when we are trying to respond professionally. To do that, we need to step back and take a deep breath. I think it is unrealistic to think that we can live in this profession and not experience conflict from time to time. We just have to [learn how to] manage it professionally.

When asked the same question, the principal at Davidson High School said, "Nobody likes conflict, and nobody likes to lose either. When you lose, you learn and grow from it. You better your relationships and better the situation." Although pressed to expand upon her response, she did not offer any further comments.

> It was clear from the response by the principal at Samson Middle School principal that he had experienced conflict as a destructive force, based on his clarifications.

> If it's negative, just to be negative or negative [just to present opposing view], and I can't figure out why [someone is presenting a] negative [response], then I think it can be destructive. But absolutely, I think [conflict] can be constructive, if someone has a dissenting voice. [In that case], we need to hear about it. They are thinking about something we haven't thought about. I think that is fine. But just to have conflict, for conflict's sake, I don't think that is helpful at all.

When the Johnson Middle School principal was asked the same question, he replied that conflict can be a constructive force in schools. He then asserted that people disagree in life and have to work through those situations.

> There is no way we are ever going to agree on everything. There are over 100 people in this building. If I could get all of them to always agree, that would be a great thing. I could probably run the country if I had that power . . . There are things we are going to disagree on, and it's good to work through that. It's just life skills that you are going to get from that. I tell my students that this is something that they're going to have to deal with later in life. I say this is a good skill for them to have. If they can learn to work through things and resolve things, life will be so much better for them. I think [learning to deal with conflict] a good thing.

The principal at Victory Elementary answered the same question by saying she has a different viewpoint today regarding conflict than she did when she was younger. She now feels that conflict can fuel positive change, "probably because I'm older. When I was younger, I probably didn't think that." She enjoys it when someone at her schools says, "Wait! What if we did that this way?" That question can "facilitate positive conflict" that results in "positive change" and growth.

Like her peers, the Midway Elementary School principal responded that conflict can be constructive. She told me about a time when her school had a particular issue and positive change resulted from the conflict. She said the method for assigning students to classrooms had always been a teacher responsibility, but parents had typically had input. She said the process needed tweaking because "a manipulation had been happening." The principal stated that "there was sometimes conflict with where they placed kids." She explained that the conflict led to change.

> Had we not experienced conflict, we wouldn't have seen the bigger picture. It was an agent for change. We have to ask if it is something we are going to do because it is best practice, then people have to get used to it. Or is it something that in looking at it needs to change? It was good conflict. That's good sometimes. If everybody was the same, you'd never change what you were doing. You have to be willing to think outside the box. That doesn't always involve conflict, but sometimes it can.

She went on to explain her experience with conflict in different schools. She said there is less conflict in her school than in other buildings where she has been employed. She attributes that to their way of managing conflict.

> I have worked in lots of buildings. We have less conflict here than I've seen in any other building. I think that is why our TELL Kentucky Survey data is so good. If it needs to be addressed, it is. Teachers have to feel like you are addressing issues in a timely manner, that you are listening. Some things don't change . . . they can be upset about it . . . we say, this is what we've decided and this is what we are doing. But you have to know who to feel out. Each team's

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personality is a little different. As a whole, just because you have four individuals working together, you still have to know the personalities in there. I don't have favorite grade levels or grade levels that feel they are more empowered than others. I've been in schools that have that.

Teacher Perspectives

Like the principals, teachers participating in the six focus-group interviews were asked, *Do you believe that conflict can be a constructive force in schools? Please explain your answer.* A teacher at Logan High School responded quickly, "Yes, of course it can be." She described a problem at her school that required a solution: It was discussed during committee meetings and department meetings, and discussions became "heated" at times. However, she was impressed by the willingness of everyone was to find the best solution for the school. She said she did not hear of "whining or hurt feelings" after the decision was made. It was "definitely an example of how conflict can be constructive." Another participant in that focus group said, "Teachers are professional here. We can agree to disagree and move on." A colleague then explained, "The culture comes straight from the principal." She said the principal always remains calm, no matter the issue. Thus, at Logan High School, "People definitely tell each other what they think during meetings, but no one seems to be upset afterwards. It doesn't get personal."

A teacher from Davidson High School believes that conflict can be constructive as long as everyone is "careful not to take comments personally." She said that, unfortunately, too often people get upset because their idea is not chosen. Another teacher recalled she once read something that she has tried to keep in mind: "Show up, speak your peace, and don't be attached to the outcome." She said that if everyone engaged in the discussions with that thought in mind, constructive conflict would be

possible. However, she reported, "too often, people come to the discussion with negativity towards people and that prevents them from making the conflict constructive."

During the focus group at Samson Middle School, a teacher reported that when school administrators are present at a meeting, there is greater potential for conflict being constructive. She said, "Our principal is really big on letting everyone have a voice. He doesn't let disagreements get ugly." She further explained that her principal "steers people" in the direction of making the best decision for students and he encourages people to stay positive. Similarly, a teacher at Johnson Middle School responded, "Yes," to the question about conflict being constructive, then qualified his reply by stating the administrators at his school value everyone.

> I've found that we are always able to come together and value everyone's perspectives. I don't think anyone who voices their opinion is ever wholeheartedly disappointed. I think everyone wants what is best for the kids. They are able to swallow their pride and realize that maybe what they wanted was a good idea, but wasn't the best idea. A lot of times we can come to a consensus based on the ideas that are presented.

A teacher from Victory Elementary described solutions that came from constructive conflict. She explained that her principal is "very much a listener, even when it is her way or the highway. She listens." The teachers at Midway Elementary School talked about how their principal and assistant principal have been able to use conflict in a constructive manner. According to one teacher, the principal "is a problem solver, and the assistant principal is a great listener. They work together with us to solve problems. We are in it together." Another teacher added that if the principal "finds something that would help you at 10:30 at night, you'll find out about it at 10:30 at night. You know you and your kids are her priority." A third teacher asserted, "Come hell or high water, we know we are going to move mountains for these kids."

Conditions Assuring Productive Conflict

The last question posed to all focus group-participants was, *"If you believe conflict can be a constructive force in decision making in schools, what conditions assure conflict is productive?"* The Logan High School teachers agreed that trust among staff members was the most important condition to ensure conflict is productive. "It has to come from the principal . . . that feeling that everyone can contribute something and we can be better because of us all."

A teacher from Davidson High School replied, "Everyone has to be committed to making decisions that benefit the students first, not the adults." Another teacher added, "The teachers can't take things personally if things don't go the way they want them to go." A peer then interjected, "It cannot be based on seniority, because new teachers have valid ideas. I guess I'm saying that all voices need to be valued."

When the teachers from Samson Middle School were asked the same question, a teacher quickly replied that productive conflict would "come from a school with high teacher empowerment, trust among everyone, and a respect for each other's ideas." Another teacher agreed, but added that the administrators "would have to remain unbiased during discussions. I've been in a school where they played favorites and held it against teachers who didn't share their viewpoints." A veteran teacher at the school responded, "I think it is very difficult for conflict to be productive if the people in leadership [positions] are not committed to listening to all ideas and finding what is best for kids." The other teachers participating in the interview agreed with her response.

Johnson Middle School teachers talked about how much they valued the culture of trust in their school. They agreed that trust stemmed from the principal's willingness

for everyone to be heard. One teacher explained, "He never shuts anyone down, no matter how silly the ideas are." Another teacher then stated, "I worked in a school where conflict was never productive—ever. People never spoke up because they knew their ideas would never lead anywhere. I'm so thankful to be working at a school that is nothing like that."

The responses by participants at Victory Elementary School were similar to the others. For example, one teacher asserted, "All viewpoints should be considered." Another teacher said that everyone involved needs to be "open to ideas that are different from their own, and be willing to change their minds." Trust among staff members and commitment to making the school a great place to learn were also required.

Likewise, teachers at Midway Elementary School reiterated the same conditions required to ensure conflict is productive. One teacher said that the process at her school begins with the principal. She ensures that everyone consider all ideas before choosing the one that is best for the school community.

> It starts with the principal. She wants our school to be the best in the district. That means listening to every idea someone has and researching the best ways to serve our students. Everyone has to be flexible and try new things. If it doesn't work, we will go back to the drawing board. But, everyone has to be open to new ideas.

Another teacher added, "And if you disagree with someone, you have to do it in a professional manner. You will get called out by the principal if you are getting personal." The teachers at Midway Elementary School talked about the low turnover of teachers at the school and the fact that the teachers were there for the right reasons. They did not get their feelings hurt very easily and were dedicated to serving the students first.

Online Survey Results: Constructive Conflict

The online survey included several statements related to attributes of constructive conflict. The teachers were asked to respond to statements with the following choices: *Almost always, Frequently, Occasionally, Seldom,* or *Almost never.* Several questions included in the online survey were directly related to the conditions necessary for constructive conflict to take place. Vision, commitment and accountability are attributes of constructive conflict.

After examining the data from these questions, it is evident that the majority of teachers participating in this study believe that their schools have an environment that supports constructive conflict. Over 50% of the respondents indicated that teachers *almost always* or *frequently* solicit their peers' opinions during meetings, challenge each other about opinions shared, discuss difficult issues, and share dissimilar ideas. More than 80% of respondents believe that the teachers *almost always frequently* tap into their colleagues' expertise. The other results were impressive as well. Eighty percent of teachers said that teachers *almost always* or *frequently* follow through on commitments and promises.

Agreement on the survey prompts centered on the priorities and vision of the principal and teachers working at the six schools is further evidence that these schools have the conditions necessary to facilitate constructive conflict. Eighty percent of teachers reported that they *strongly agree* or *agree* that teachers are clear about the school's direction and priorities. Over 70% of teachers indicated being comfortable giving their unguarded opinions to each other, and over 80% believe that their principal values the ideas of each teacher, that teachers are willing to rethink ideas when presented with new information, and that the quality of decisions are continually judged over time.

The majority of teachers answered affirmatively to the questions related to being committed to decisions, following through with commitments, judging the quality of decisions over time, and rethinking decisions when presented with new information. These qualities are important to maintaining a culture that is conducive to constructive conflict. It was encouraging to see that most respondents believe their colleagues are committed to analyzing decisions over time and following through on commitments.

Five survey prompts were specifically targeted toward accountability. Results from Question 12, *During discussions, teachers in my school challenge one another about how they arrived at their conclusions and opinions,* surprised me. Challenging one another's conclusions is fundamental to constructive conflict and organizational growth. Yet, only 20% of teachers responded that this *seldom* or *almost never* occurs in their schools.

Results of Question 25, *Teachers in my school are quick to confront peers about problems in their respective areas of responsibility,* were also unexpected. Twenty-four percent of teachers responded that this *seldom* or *almost never* happens in the schools where they work.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from a study about how leaders of six Kentucky schools with high teacher-empowerment levels use conflict as a positive force to move their schools forward. Principal interviews and teacher focus-group interviews conducted at the schools examined how teacher empowerment is evidenced in these schools. The interviews also explored the topic of conflict in the schools and how principals and teachers react to conflict. The study participants explained how conflict

can be used as a constructive force in schools and the conditions they believe must be

present in order for this to occur. The results of an online survey were also presented and

discussed in this chapter.

In Chapter 5, I present my interpretation of how constructive conflict can move a

school forward and the conditions necessary for this to happen. Implications for further

research and for practice, based on the study findings, are also presented.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored how school leaders use conflict constructively to promote individual growth among teachers and organizational learning in P12 schools. Although the inquiry gathered perceptions of conflict from principals and teachers, the research also yielded information about the attributes of an environment conducive to ensuring that conflict can be a constructive force. Identifying and discovering those conditions became an integral part of determining how conflict is used effectively in P12 educational settings.

Public educators are regularly asked to adapt to or initiate changes set forth by various governmental and community agencies to improve schools. Hall and Hord (1987) captured the essence of this reality when they wrote, "For schools to improve, teachers must change" (p.13). Over the past 40 years, the concept of organizational learning has attracted attention as a way to adapt to change (Cangelosi & Dill, 1965; March & Simon, 1958). Organizational learning is defined as "the deliberate use of individual, group, and system learning to embed new thinking and practices that continuously renew and transform the organization in ways that support shared aims" (Collinson & Cook, 2006, p. 8). According to Senge (1990), the only schools able to respond to change are those that are flexible, adaptive, and productive.

This study began with the topic of teacher empowerment because organizational learning requires staff members to be part of change. Teachers who are empowered are more likely to feel invested in the goals of the organization, particularly because the "intersection of teacher empowerment and the capacity for organizational learning is a

central thrust for future school reform" (Marks & Louis, 1999, p. 708). The connection between school organizational capacity and teacher empowerment has been supported (Levin, 1991; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994). A school community that appreciates teachers' work and empowers teachers is a critical component of school success (Silins & Mulford, 2004; Silins et al, 2002). Confirmation of the connection between organizational capacity and teacher empowerment has appeared in educational research, ranging from the necessary school conditions for functional empowerment to the prime school conditions where democratic organizations can support teaching staffs in becoming professional communities (Levin, 1991; Marks & Louis, 1997; Robertson, Wohlstetter, & Mohrman, 1995). It was thus important to conduct research that explored the link between organizational learning and teacher empowerment.

The six schools selected as study sites were thus chosen because they evidenced high levels of teacher empowerment on the 2015 TELL Kentucky survey. After initial selection, TELL Kentucky survey scores for the same six schools were analyzed in the area of school leadership because the components of organizational learning are directly related to school leadership. Responses to questions posed during interviews and on the online survey provided specific examples of how conflict can be a constructive force in their schools.

The overarching research question in this study was, *How is conflict used constructively for promoting individual growth and organizational learning in Kentucky public schools where teacher empowerment is high?* According to responses by the study participants, the conditions that contributed to productive conflict were (a) teacher

leadership and empowerment, (b) teacher engagement and decision making and, (c) risk-safe environment. I expected these themes to be prevalent. However, I did not expect to find extraordinary levels of trust and commitment from almost every respondent.

Several research propositions guided the design and focus of this mixed-methods case study about constructive conflict. The discussion that follows is organized around the three prevalent themes that emerged from the study and addresses common issues found in all six schools. The reasons for the high scores on the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey are presented in the following section, which is followed by a discussion of potential study limitations. The chapter closes with a short reflection and conclusion by the author of this study, who currently serves as a teacher in a central Kentucky public school.

Perceptions of Teacher Leadership and Empowerment

Teacher empowerment was evidenced at these six schools prior to launch of this study. Each school scored at the highest level of teacher empowerment, in their respective grade levels, on the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey results for the district in which the schools are located. Louis and Mark (1999) contended that "a unified organizational culture built around ongoing inquiry into the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning depends on the collective influence of teachers who function as empowered professionals." Supporting the important connection between teacher empowerment and organizational health, they found that empowerment accounted for a significant amount of the variance in the capacity of organizational learning in schools. The findings and implications surrounding teacher leadership and empowerment are presented below.

Findings

Each principal and focus-group participant discussed teacher leadership and empowerment during their interviews. Although the principals had differing answers about how teacher empowerment is manifested in their schools, each agreed that teacher empowerment was an important part of their culture. One high school principal empowered his teachers by seeking out their expertise and encouraging them to share their strengths with others. He emphasized that his teachers are leaders in the school not only because they hold leadership positions but also because they exercise leadership by teaching others. This practice was affirmed by Scribner, Truell, Hager, and Srichai (2001) who determined that school leaders should take seriously the role that continuing professional development and specifically education play in fostering teachers' sense of empowerment within the school, especially when that empowerment pertains to participation in critical school decisions.

Each principal spoke about their teachers being actively involved in the decision-making within the school. Six dimensions of teacher empowerment were defined by Short and Reinhart (1992): decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy and impact. The principals' responses reflected an atmosphere where autonomy is valued and teachers are able to impact their school environments in a positive manner. The principals' responses likewise echoed the findings of Louis and Marks (1999) who emphasize that a unified organizational culture developed around ongoing inquiry into the quality and effectiveness of learning and teaching is contingent upon the shared influence of teachers who operate as empowered professionals.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Teacher leadership and empowerment were found to be a key theme for creating an environment for organizational learning that supports constructive conflict. Therefore, I recommend that school leaders provide opportunities for teachers to serve in leadership positions that meaningfully impact school decision making. I also recommend that principals empower teachers by encouraging their professional growth, supporting their individual autonomy, and ensuring that they have a clear path to make an impact in their schools (Short & Rinehart, 1992).

Recommendations for Further Research

The responses from principals and teachers regarding teacher leadership and empowerment were very similar. It was clear from both the principals and teachers that there many opportunities for teacher leadership existed in these schools. It was also evident that the principals encouraged teacher empowerment in their schools. While some teachers were not comfortable serving in leadership roles, those interviewed were well aware of the opportunities available to them. Further research is thus needed in schools that did not score as well on the TELL Kentucky Survey in the area of teacher empowerment.

Teacher Engagement and Decision Making

The teachers who voluntarily completed the online survey and participated in the focu-group interviews were highly engaged in their schools. They were also eager to contribute to their school's performance in a positive manner. Although all teachers were invited to participate in focus groups, almost every focus-group participant had a leadership role in their respective school. It should thus come as no surprise that the

capacity for organizational learning depends on teachers who participate in school decision making and exercise professional influence over the educational process (Louis & Marks, 1999). Accordingly, principals and superintendents are encouraged to foster a decision-making environment that includes all teachers, wherein increased decision making by teachers is not simply a goal but rather carefully integrated into the process of how things get done (Short & Greer, 1993).

Research suggests that teacher empowerment hinges on teacher involvement in decision making, which is an essential dimension of empowerment. However, for that involvement to be meaningful, two conditions must be met. First, decisions must focus on areas important to teachers, such as issues related directly to learning and teaching. Second, teachers must feel that their participation actually affects the decisions made (Short & Greer, 1993). The findings and implications regarding teacher engagement and decision making are outlined below.

Findings

The study participants recognized that teacher participation is fostered in all areas of school governance. In five of the six schools, discrepancies in responses became evident between those respondents who felt that their input was considered by school leaders and used in making final decisions and those who felt their input was ignored when the final decisions were made. In those five schools, teachers' responses indicated that principals extended opportunities for teacher engagement through committee meetings, faculty meetings, team meetings, and simply meeting with a member of the administrative team to express concerns or ideas. In all six schools, principals stated that they encourage and welcome teacher input in all forms.

In most instances, the teachers felt that their input was carefully considered and had an impact on the final decision made by administrators. However, in one elementary school, a teacher stated that her principal "listens to feedback, even when she has already made up her mind." She said that her principal "pretends to take our input into consideration, but we all know she has the bigger picture in mind and will make decisions according to that." This teacher noted that the principal has access to information that the teachers are not privy to, and she makes the right decision for the school based on all the information.

Teachers must be certain that their decision-making affects real outcomes. According to Short (1994a), decision making is limited to participation that directly affects work such as budgeting, scheduling, curriculum, and teacher selection. The majority of teachers in the study affirmed that the principals consider their feedback when evaluating programs and selecting new teachers. They also agreed that teachers have a voice in scheduling classes in secondary schools or assigning students to teachers in elementary schools. One elementary teacher said that the budget for ordering items for classroom use is completed solely by the teachers because the principal "trusts our judgement." The principal simply signs off on the budget. Teachers from this school were particularly complimentary of their principal's confidence in the teachers' ability.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Research has shown that it is important for principals to facilitate authentic participation by asking for the input of those affected by decisions, providing background information necessary for staff to weigh in on decisions, and treating teachers as capable professionals whose insights are valuable (Black, 1997; Blase & Blase, 2001). Principals

need to create several avenues for teachers to provide input. Many teachers are not comfortable in leadership roles, but they want their input to be considered before decisions are made. Several schools in this study had structures in place for team leaders to listen to teachers and share their concerns and ideas with the people making the decisions. Strategies like this make everyone feel that their voices are heard in the decision-making process.

Teachers also need to feel valued by their school leaders because they may be reluctant to speak up if they do not think their input matters. If principals take the time and effort to provide the background information necessary for teachers to provide a thoughtful contribution to the discussion, principals will receive more constructive input and teachers will feel valued. Several teachers who participated in the focus groups felt that their principal did reveal all the information necessary for them to provide helpful feedback. Several also thought their principal had made a decision prior to requesting feedback from teachers.

Recommendations for Future Research

It was evident from respondents that principals want teachers to be engaged in all aspects of the school environment, although principals' actions related to teacher engagement varied. Further research is needed to find out what methods are most effective and respected for ensuring all groups are represented when making decisions that impact the entire school community.

<div align="center">

Risk-Safe Environment

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The six schools included in the study demonstrated risk-safe environments as evidenced by results of 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey in the areas of trust in leadership

and value of staff. Research findings reported by Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2001) suggests that when there is a greater perceived level of trust in a school, teachers had a greater sense of efficacy—a belief in their ability to affect actions leading to success. Data gathered through the interviews and the online survey in this study affirmed this proposition. High levels of trust and commitment were apparent in the teacher comments in schools with high levels of teacher empowerment. The attributes of a risk-safe environment were illustrated in the focus-group participants' responses. The teachers also mentioned these characteristics when they were asked what type of environment was necessary for conflict to be constructive.

Research has revealed a significant link between teachers' collaboration with the principal and their trust in the principal, between collaboration with colleagues and trust in colleagues, and between collaboration with parents and trust in parents (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2001). In order to create an atmosphere of trust, principals must demonstrate honesty and commitment to follow through—in all interactions with faculty, support staff, parents, and students (Barlow, 2001; Blase & Blase, 2001; Sebring & Bryk, 2000).

Principals earn trust from members of the school community by encouraging and engaging in open communication and actively making themselves available to teachers, parents, students, and staff (Black, 1997; Blase & Blase, 2001; Sebring & Bryk, 2000). Barlow (2001) states, "Once the leader takes the risk of being open, others are more likely to take a similar risk—and thereby take the first steps necessary to building a culture of trust" (p. 26). Though it may feel uncomfortable, being proactive when it

comes to dealing with conflicts can "root out fuzzy thinking" (Smith, 2014, p.1) and get people used to working through differences and trusting one another.

A risk-safe environment is evidenced by staff awareness that they are valued by the school leader. According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), "As public criticism focuses on schools' inadequacies, teachers need to know that their principal values their efforts and senses their good intentions" (p. 129). Richards (2007) found that when teachers feel respected, valued, and empowered, there is a higher level of commitment, less staff turnover, and greater school stability. Successful principals understand the value of their teachers; they respect teachers as individuals and genuinely want them to succeed and grow professionally.

Still another attribute of a risk-safe environment is freedom to try new things and make mistakes. Principals who support innovation and risk taking demonstrate respect for teachers as learners and as professionals whose judgment can be trusted (Blase & Blase, 2001). Effective principals recognize that change is a journey of learning and risk taking (Cole et al., 1999). "Trusted principals," Barlow (2001) notes, "empower teachers and draw out the best in them" (p. 31).

The final attribute of a risk-safe environment that was discerned during this study was openness to dissenting views. Being able to express concerns and disagreement without fear of reprisal is essential to building trusting relationships (Lien, Johnson, & Ragland, 1997).

Findings

During interviews with principals, they talked at length about their respect and trust in their school staff. They voiced their willingness to listen to input from all

teachers about all things, and several talked about how open they are with their teachers. One high school principal said he shares his professional growth plan with his staff and encourages their feedback. During interviews with his staff, it was evident that they appreciate his efforts to be honest and open with them. Because he is trusted and respected by his teachers, they also in turn feel comfortable going to him with concerns.

Several teachers reported that their principals trust them to make instructional decisions that benefit their students. Not a single focus-group participant expressed concerns or frustrations that their principal micromanaged the teachers' instructional decisions.

I was a bit surprised to find that almost all responses by principals and their respective teaching staff to interview questions in this area were aligned. The principals told me what they try to achieve an environment that is risk safe, and the teachers recognized and confirmed the efforts of their principals. Teachers spoke about how difficult it must be for their principals to be available to hear their concerns, and it was obvious that they felt valued by their principals.

Principals stated that they were open to new ideas from teachers. Teachers confirmed that by discussing new initiatives they had created, with the encouragement of their school leaders. One teacher spoke about her principal's willingness to let her take on the scheduling of morning and afternoon duties and to support her new ideas. She perceived that this would "never have occurred" in the school where she previously worked because the "principal never trusted anyone to do anything."

One teacher illustrated the concept of a risk-safe environment through sharing a situation that occurred a few months earlier. She described a new teacher who wanted to

create a "paperless" classroom. In order to establish this type of environment, additional

funds were needed to purchase technology for the students to have a 1-1 ratio. The

principal found a grant opportunity and assisted the teacher in writing a grant and

providing additional funds to purchase technology for the students. The principal

partnered with the teacher to enable her to create a "paperless" classroom, which

encouraged other teachers to investigate innovative practices to apply in their classrooms.

In a risk-safe environment, all staff members are free to express their views,

whether or not they are in agreement with others' ideas. Staff members behave in a

professional manner and listen to one another without fear that they will face retribution

for their differing views. One school excelled in this particular area. A teacher described

a discussion during a team meeting: "It became heated, but that was alright, because there

were many of us who were passionate about it." She said that no one left the meeting

upset or with hurt feelings because everyone wanted what was best for the school.

Another teacher described how uncomfortable she feels when staff disagree and thus

sometimes figuratively or physically "scoots back from the table." She understands that

having conversations with dissenting opinions is important for progressing toward

consensus, but she simply is not willing to engage in that type of conversation. Instead,

she talks privately with the principal after the meeting to give her opinion.

Many teachers in the focus-group interviews expressed the opinion that their

principals were open to differing viewpoints when discussing issues. None of the

teachers indicated that their principals would fault them for conveying counterpoints.

The performance of a group or team is improved when members feel secure in voicing

opinions or disagreeing with the principal or other members of the team. A teacher who

chooses or feels forced to self-silence could very well be denying the team important contributions related to experience, perception or opinion (Cosby, 2016).

Recommendations for Future Practice

Although creating a risk-safe environment requires vulnerability on the part of principals and teachers, the outcome can produce immense rewards. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) define trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable" (p. 712), which in turn depends on perceived trustworthiness—that quality of the trusted party that makes the trustor willing to be vulnerable. Principals need to share their successes and failures with their teachers as a way to encourage them to take risks and to expect mistakes along the way. Trust, respect, openness, and freedom can result from a principal's willingness to be vulnerable to his or her staff. Unchecked relationship conflict wears away at employees' sense of safety and makes it more difficult to have constructive disagreements. Disruptive thinking should be welcomed because it has the potential to spark transformation (Cosby, 2016).

Recommendations for Future Research

Teachers in this study were clear about what they want from their principals in order to feel safe, but not all principals are willing or able to create a risk-safe atmosphere. Some principals cannot let their guard down when working with teachers nor can they release decision-making power to others. Further research is needed to explore how principals, who have created risk-safe environments, find a way to maintain control, yet be vulnerable to their staff.

Perceptions of Conflict

Work place conflict can be personal (relationship conflict) or work related (task conflict). Unlike relationship conflict, task conflict can be productive or unproductive. Professional conflicts that are managed correctly can help move a school forward because conflict can produce alternative or new ideas that keep a school from becoming stagnant. According to Lippmann (1946), "Where all think alike, no one thinks very much" (p. 69). Most principals are trained to focus on cohesion and harmony among the staff. Since conflict is often viewed as a threat to school harmony, principals are taught to ignore or end conflict rather than use it as a learning opportunity (Stewart, 2015). Thus, it takes an innovative principal to make conflict productive. Blase and Blase (2001) advise principals to "welcome and embrace conflict as a way to produce substantive, positive outcomes over the long run. Regarding conflict as potentially constructive helps build supportive human relationships because it allows us to deal with our differences in win-win ways" (p. 29).

Leaders from corporate organizations know the benefits that constructive conflict can bring. Joel Peterson, chairman of JetBlue Airways, explained how conflict can be productive in his company.

> Healthy organizations are often the noisiest. To outsiders, they may appear conflict-ridden and unable to find a perfect harmony. But inside, leaders are harnessing the different viewpoints and ideas to power progress, to move the agenda forward. (Smith, 2014, p.1)

Managed conflict has the potential to move a team from complacency to seeing that great things never come from comfort zones (Cosby, 2016). The information surrounding perceptions of conflict is discussed below.

Findings

Data collected during this study revealed that conflict between teacher and principal or teacher and teacher is uncomfortable, especially when it becomes personal. One veteran teacher stated, "No one likes conflict, but a certain degree is inevitable when people work closely together." Heffernan stated, "teamwork promotes the kind of constructive conflict from which better ideas emerge, honed by the clash of disciplines and the friction of divergent minds" (2015, p.9).

Very few teachers in this study told me they are completely comfortable with workplace conflict. Those who were tended to compartmentalize workplace conflict and leave it behind when they left the school building; others felt that it was at least slightly uncomfortable to be at odds with a colleague. However, when asked about conflict in meetings, teachers who felt that they worked in a risk-safe environment were willing to share dissenting views. These teachers shared that they knew every person wanted what was best for the students, and they were willing to share differing ideas to find the best option. They also willingly let their idea go in favor of a better one. One teacher said, "Someone once told me to bring my ideas to the table, but not to be attached to mine, because it may not be the best." A principal shared that her teachers do not always leave a meeting feeling optimistic about the decision that was made, but they always support the decision shortly afterward. One teacher explained, "Sometimes I need some cooling off after a meeting that is heated, then I can look back and see why something was decided." She perceived that meetings get intense because the teachers want what is best for the students. Another teacher shared how her colleagues interact.

> We treat each other respectfully and can agree to disagree. We try to keep the end goal in mind and support each other in figuring out the best way to achieve that

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goal. If we disagree, we discuss the pros, cons, what ifs and get second opinions. We also let the situation "cool down" and discuss rationally after we have thought about it deeply.

A high school teacher admitted that, "Conflict is necessary for success, but some take it personally." A female, elementary teacher stated, "Conflict is not a comfortable situation. Any person should feel some level of discomfort when facing conflict. It does not however mean that conflict is unproductive or negative." While conflict is disruptive, it does not need to be destructive (Cosby, 2016). Constructive conflict is the foundation of healthy organizations. In schools that are healthy organizations, principals understand the significance of productive conflict to help achieve exceptional results, guide innovation and direct progressive change.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Principals do not have the strategies or resources to analyze and manage conflict through constructive group processes. If schools are expected to be proficient in ensuring that conflict is constructive, principals have to be taught the skills necessary to achieve this goal. Leaders need training to know how to manage conflict. Further, the school culture must be engineered so that "conflict comes out where it can be seen, explored and confronted safely" (Heffernan, 2015, p.1).

Principals need to be taught to accept that conflict is natural and can be constructive, if approached correctly. Leaders need to convey the belief that "when conflict arises, our responsibility for our own actions and our beliefs should be greater than our need to assign blame" (Siddiqi, 2015, p.1).

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is needed to examine what skills are necessary for principals to possess in order to manage conflict and use it constructively in their schools. Research is also needed to determine how district supervisors coach principals in conflict management and what training they have received in this area. In order to be successful, district administrators need to convey the same message to all principals.

Lessons Learned

Throughout my professional and personal life, I have been privileged to serve in various capacities in the educational system. The most important role is that of a parent of three children who have benefited from many extraordinary teachers in the public school system. I served as the project leader in the communications department of the central office of a school system. During the nine years I served in that position, I was privy to change at the district level and witnessed conflict as a result of necessary change. At the district level, most directors were experts at constructive conflict. I witnessed many redistricting meetings where a healthy discussion of differing points of view took place. In most cases, the directors were people with many years of experience in schools with successful track records. I was fortunate to be exposed to constructive conflict in that position.

When I transitioned into the role as a classroom teacher at an elementary school, I became more familiar with conflict among the student body as well as conflict between teachers and the school leaders. The initiatives directed by school leaders often brought about varying degrees of controversy among the staff. I was elected by my fellow teachers to serve as their representative on both the School-Based Decision Making

(SBDM) Council and the Faculty Advisory Committee at my school. Management and resolution of conflict is a part of every meeting. Sometimes the conflict is productive, but very often it is destructive.

I also served as one of the elected parent members of the SBDM Council at my son's elementary school for six years and currently serve as an elected parent on my daughter's middle school SBDM Council. Recently, I participated actively through the process of choosing a new middle school principal. The experience was led by the middle school director and was an exercise in productive conflict. Differing ideas were welcomed from parents, students, and teachers. The SBDM Council worked to merge the ideas into a principal profile that was acceptable to all stakeholders. While we certainly did not agree on every idea, council members were respectful to one another during the process and our unified vision kept us on track.

As a doctoral student at the University of Kentucky, a course assignment required me to review an article about conflict being a productive force in schools, rather than a destructive force. I began reading about constructive conflict and reflecting upon my own perceptions of conflict in my various roles in the school system. This interest eventually brought me to this study.

During the course of this study, I was able to analyze school scores on the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey, visit and interview principals, administer an online survey, and interview teachers in a focus-group setting. With every article I read and every person I interviewed, I became more interested in the topic.

Exploring constructive conflict has reminded me that every conversation matters. In order for us to reach the best decision for all students, there must be a risk-safe

environment in place in order for everyone to be able to participate. Every member also has to be willing to contribute to the discussion. This means putting personal issues to the side, respecting and valuing the ideas of others, and doing what is right for students.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have been able to study a topic that became my passion. This topic is one that will be discussed in organizations for years to come. I hope the outcomes of this study will lead leaders to have discussions about how to best prepare principals for the unavoidable conflict they will experience in their schools.

Conclusion

As our educational system evolves, change will undoubtedly continue to impact school staff. As a result of this change, principals will be faced with unavoidable conflict. It is imperative that this conflict is used as a constructive force in schools.

This study described and analyzed how conflict is used constructively for promoting individual growth and organizational learning in Kentucky schools where teacher empowerment is high. This research took place between June 2016 and December 2016. It began with a review of 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey data and continued through completion of the focus-group interviews. Four research questions guided the focus of this mixed methods study. The inquiry explored and analyzed principal and teacher perceptions of teacher empowerment and conflict in their schools.

Findings revealed that participants believe teacher empowerment and leadership, teacher engagement and decision making, and a risk-safe environment are necessary for conflict to be a constructive force in schools. In order to create a culture that displays these attributes, school leaders must ensure that their staff members understand that their contributions to the organization are significant. Trust, commitment, accountability are

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all built on a foundation where all employees feel valued. Conflict is inevitable in every

organization. However, in a risk-safe environment, it is possible that constructive

conflict can produce individual growth and organizational learning.

APPENDIX A

APPROVAL FROM FAYETTE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

It's about **kids.**
FAYETTE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

TO: Heidi Thompson-Abell

         University of Kentucky

From: Michael Owen

         Fayette County Public Schools
         Office of Evaluation and Planning

Subject: Constructive Conflict in Schools as a Means to Promote Individual and
         Organizational Learning and Growth

Date: Feb. 5, 2016

This letter is to notify you that the Fayette County Public Schools Office of Evaluation and Planning has evaluated your research application and has granted you tentative approval. Full approval will be given when we receive evidence that this study has been approved by your institution's IRB.

This approval is good for one calendar year from the date on this letter. If any changes are made during the course of the study, you will be required to submit a new application for re-approval. You will be expected to submit a copy of your results to this office within 30 days of completion of the study.

If you have any questions about this process you may email me at michael.owen@fayette.kyschools.us

Congratulations and good luck.

Michael Owen

Administrative Data Strategist

Fayette County Public Schools

Office of Data Management, Planning, Program Evaluation & Assessment

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Board of Education: John Price, Chair • Melissa Bacon, Vice Chair • Amanda Ferguson • Douglas Barnett • Daryl Love
Superintendent Emmanuel Caulk

701 East Main Street, Lexington, Kentucky 40502 • Phone: 859.381.4100 • www.fcps.net
Mailing Address: 1126 Russell Cave Rd., Lexington, Kentucky 40505

University of Kentucky   13   F2.0150
Revised 2/9/16   Nonmedical IRB ICF Template

IRB APPROVAL

U K
UNIVERSITY OF
KENTUCKY

Initial Review

Approval Ends   **IRB Number**
June 2, 2017   16-0403-P4S

TO: Heidi Thompson-Abell
             111 Dickey Hall
             0017
             PI phone #: (859) 333-7214

FROM: Chairperson/Vice Chairperson
             Non-medical Institutional Review Board (IRB)

SUBJECT: Approval of Protocol Number 16-0403-P4S

DATE: June 7, 2016

On June 3, 2016, the Non-medical Institutional Review Board approved your protocol entitled:

Constructive Conflict as a Means to Promote Individual Growth and Organizational Learning

PLEASE NOTE: Although the IRB approved the protocol to take place in Fayette County based on the district's letter of support, research activities should not commence in the individual schools listed in the protocol until letters of support from those schools have been provided for your file.

Approval is effective from June 3, 2016 until June 2, 2017 and extends to any consent/assent form, cover letter, and/or phone script.   If applicable, attached is the IRB approved consent/assent document(s) to be used when enrolling subjects. **[Note, subjects can only be enrolled using consent/assent forms which have a valid "IRB Approval" stamp unless special waiver has been obtained from the IRB.]** Prior to the end of this period, you will be sent a Continuation Review Report Form which must be completed and returned to the Office of Research Integrity so that the protocol can be reviewed and approved for the next period.

In implementing the research activities, you are responsible for complying with IRB decisions, conditions and requirements. The research procedures should be implemented as approved in the IRB protocol. It is the principal investigators responsibility to ensure any changes planned for the research are submitted for review and approval by the IRB prior to implementation. Protocol changes made without prior IRB approval to eliminate apparent hazards to the subject(s) should be reported in writing immediately to the IRB. Furthermore, discontinuing a study or completion of a study is considered a change in the protocol's status and therefore the IRB should be promptly notified in writing.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research" from the Office of Research Integrity's IRB Survival Handbook web page [http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/IRB-Survival-Handbook.html#PIresponsibilities]. Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through ORI's web site [http://www.research.uky.edu/ori]. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at (859) 257-9428.

N. Van Tubergen, PhD/ah

Chairperson/Vice Chairperson

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Hello,

My name is Heidi Thompson-Abell, and I am a doctoral candidate conducting dissertation research under the supervision of Dr. Tricia Browne-Ferrigno, Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership Studies at the University of Kentucky.

You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are currently serving as a principal of a Central Kentucky elementary school that had high levels of teacher empowerment as evidenced by the 2015 TELL Kentucky Survey. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about 6 people to do so. The study will investigate how school culture promotes individual growth and organizational learning.

Participation in this study involves an individual interview that will focus on the culture, conflict, trust, accountability and commitment in your school. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes of your time and will be conducted in a location convenient to you that assures privacy.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via electronic mail at Heidi.thompsonabell@gmail.com. I will send you a confirmation email that provides information concerning the location of the focus group. If you have to cancel your appointment, please email or call me at 859-333-7214. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Heidi Thompson-Abell

APPENDIX D

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Is teacher empowerment an important component in your school culture? Please explain your response.

2. How does your position as principal affect the level of teacher empowerment at your school?

3. If conflict occurs between another staff member and you, how do you handle it?

4. If conflict occurs between two staff members, how do you handle it?

5. How important is it to you that teachers reach consensus when discussing an issue during a meeting?

6. Do you think teachers feel comfortable giving their honest opinions to each other during meetings?

7. Do you think teachers feel comfortable giving their honest opinions to you during meetings?

8. Do you believe that conflict can be a constructive force in schools? Please explain your answer.

ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS

**How is Conflict Used Constructively for Promoting Individual Growth
and Organizational Learning in Kentucky Schools
Where Teacher Empowerment is High?**

ONLINE CONSENT FORM

You are being invited to take part in a research study about how conflict is used constructively for promoting individual growth and organizational learning in your school. You were selected to take part in this research study because you are a teacher in a Kentucky public school that has high levels of teacher empowerment, as evidenced by the 2015 TELL Kentucky survey data.

The person in charge of this study is Heidi Thompson-Abell, a student at the University of Kentucky, Department of Educational Leadership Studies. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Tricia Browne-Ferrigno, a Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Kentucky.

Although you will not receive direct personal benefit from taking part in this online survey, your responses may help professors, leadership educators, and school district leaders to understand how conflict can be used as a constructive force in schools. You have a choice about whether or not to complete this survey. If you choose to participate, you can exit the survey at any time – but you cannot return to the survey later.

Completing the online survey will take about 20 minutes. There are no known risks to participating in this study because the questions relate to your perceptions of your school culture. Questions 1-37 do not ask any information that would identify you as a study participant.

I am administering this survey through a private account that I maintain with Qualtrics, which means that I am the only person who has access to the survey or data gathered. Please be aware that while I shall make every effort to safeguard your data once received from the online survey/data gathering company, given the nature of online surveys, as with anything involving the Internet, I can never guarantee confidentiality of the data while still on the survey/data gathering company's servers, or while en-route to either them or me. I will be required to show data collected through this online survey to my committee from the University of Kentucky who are advising me during my dissertation process.

I am also seeking volunteers to participate in focus-group interviews composed of teachers from your school. If you wish to volunteer to participate in focus-group interviews, then send an e-mail message to me (hthom2@uky.edu) with the words

VOLUNTEER FOR INTERVIEW in the subject line.

Q1 Teachers in my school willingly give praise and credit to colleagues.
- ○ Almost always
- ○ Frequently
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Seldom
- ○ Almost never

Q2 Teachers in my school acknowledge their weaknesses to one another.
- ○ Almost always
- ○ Frequently
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Seldom
- ○ Almost never

Q3 Teachers in my school point out one another's unproductive behaviors.
- ○ Almost always
- ○ Frequently
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Seldom
- ○ Almost never

Q4 Teachers in my school willingly apologize to one another.
- ○ Almost always
- ○ Frequently
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Seldom
- ○ Almost never

Q5 Teachers in my school leave meetings confident that everyone is committed to the decisions that were agreed upon.
- ○ Almost always
- ○ Frequently
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Seldom
- ○ Almost never

Q6 Teachers in my school acknowledge and tap into one another's expertise.
○ Almost always
○ Frequently
○ Occasionally
○ Seldom
○ Almost never

Q7 Teachers in my school solicit one another's opinions during meetings.
○ Almost always
○ Frequently
○ Occasionally
○ Seldom
○ Almost never

Q8 Teachers in my school consistently follow through on promises and commitments.
○ Almost always
○ Frequently
○ Occasionally
○ Seldom
○ Almost never

Q9 Teachers in my school offer unprovoked, constructive feedback to one another
○ Almost always
○ Frequently
○ Occasionally
○ Seldom
○ Almost never

Q10 Teachers in my school support group decisions, even if they initially disagreed.
○ Almost always
○ Frequently
○ Occasionally
○ Seldom
○ Almost never

Q11 My principal solicits teachers' opinions during meetings
○ Almost always
○ Frequently
○ Occasionally
○ Seldom
○ Almost never

Q12 During discussions, teachers in my school challenge one another about how they arrived at their conclusions and opinions.
- ○ Almost always
- ○ Frequently
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Seldom
- ○ Almost never

Q13 During meetings with my principal, difficult issues are discussed.
- ○ Almost always
- ○ Frequently
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Seldom
- ○ Almost never

Q14 During meetings with my principal, he/she encourages staff members to share ideas, even if they are dissimilar.
- ○ Almost always
- ○ Frequently
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Seldom
- ○ Almost never

Q15 When conflict occurs during meetings, my principal confronts and deals with the issue before moving to another subject.
- ○ Almost always
- ○ Frequently
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Seldom
- ○ Almost never

Q16 My principal seeks different perspectives when solving problems.
- ○ Almost always
- ○ Frequently
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Seldom
- ○ Almost never

Q17 Once a school decision is made, my principal communicates the results and rationale to staff.
○ Almost always
○ Frequently
○ Occasionally
○ Seldom
○ Almost never

Q18 My school has a reputation for high performance.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q19 Teachers at my school are clear about our direction and priorities.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q20 During meetings, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions, to each other, even at the risk of causing disagreement.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q21 During meetings with our principal, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions even at the risk of causing disagreement
○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree or disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q22 Teachers in my school ask for help from other teachers without hesitation.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q23 Teachers in my school ask for help from our principal without hesitation.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q24 When teachers at my school fail to achieve collective goals, each teacher takes personal responsibility to improve the school's performance.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q25 Teachers in my school are quick to confront peers about problems in their respective areas of responsibility.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q26 When teachers at my school meet with our principal, he/she values the ideas of each teacher.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q27 Teachers in my school value collective success more than individual achievement.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree or disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q28 Teachers in my school are unguarded and genuine with one another.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q29 Teachers in my school are willing to rethink decisions when presented with new information.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q30 Teachers in my school continually judge the quality of decisions made over time.
○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q31 Does conflict with work colleagues make you uncomfortable?
- ○ Extremely comfortable
- ○ Slightly comfortable
- ○ Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- ○ Slightly uncomfortable
- ○ Extremely uncomfortable

Q32 Please explain your answer to the last question.

Q34 What is your gender
- ○ Male
- ○ Female

Q34 How many years have you worked in public education?
- ○ 1-5 years
- ○ 6-10 years
- ○ 11-15 years
- ○ 16 years or more

Q35 How many years have you been employed by your current school?
- ○ 1-5 years
- ○ 6-10 years
- ○ 11-15 years
- ○ 16 years or more

Q36 If you worked as an elementary school teacher, in what subject area(s) did you teach? Mark all that apply.
- ❑ English/Language Arts/Reading
- ❑ Foreign Language
- ❑ Arts/Humanities
- ❑ Mathematics
- ❑ Health/Physical Education
- ❑ Science
- ❑ Social Studies
- ❑ Special Education
- ❑ Other
- ❑ Not Applicable: I have never worked as an elementary school teacher

Q37 If you worked as a secondary school teacher, in what subject area(s) did you teach?

❑ Business/Career and Technical Education

❑ English/Language Arts/Reading

❑ Foreign Language

❑ Arts/Humanities

❑ Mathematics

❑ Health/Physical Education

❑ Science

❑ Social Studies

❑ Special Education

❑ Other

❑ Not applicable: I have never worked as a secondary school teacher

If you have questions about this study, please feel free to ask. My contact information is given below. If you have complaints, suggestions, or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the University of Kentucky Office of Research Integrity at 859-257-9428 or toll-free at 1-866-400-9428.

Thank you in advance for your assistance with this important project.

Heidi Thompson-Abell, Doctoral Candidate
University of Kentucky
Department of Educational Leadership Studies
Email: hthom2@uky.edu
Phone: 859-333-7214

APPENDIX F

RECRUITMENT FOR FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEWS

Hello,

My name is Heidi Thompson-Abell, and I am a doctoral candidate conducting dissertation research under the supervision of Dr. Tricia Browne-Ferrigno, Professor of Educational Leadership Studies at the University of Kentucky.

I am seeking teachers from your school in the Central Kentucky region to volunteer to participate in a focus group to investigate how school culture promotes individual growth and organizational learning.

Participation in this study involves a focus group that will focus on school culture, conflict, trust, accountability and commitment in your school. The focus group will take approximately 45-60 minutes of your time and will be conducted in a location convenient to you that assures privacy.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via electronic mail at Heidi.thompsonabell@gmail.com. I will send you a confirmation email that provides information concerning the location of the focus group. If you have to cancel your appointment, please email or call me at 859-333-7214. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Heidi Thompson-Abell

APPENDIX G

FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Are there opportunities for teachers to fill leadership roles in your school?

2. Do teachers affect decision making in your school?

3. If conflict occurs between another staff member and you, how do you handle it?

4. Do you think teachers feel comfortable giving their honest opinions about issues during meetings? Please explain your answer.

5. Do you believe conflict can be a constructive force for decision making in schools? Please explain your answer.

6. If you believe conflict can be a constructive force in decision making in schools, what conditions assure conflict is productive?

APPENDIX H

ONLINE SURVEY RESULT TABLES

Table A.1 Survey Responses Related to Teacher Empowerment: School Type

Online Survey Questions	School Level	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q11: My principal solicits teachers' opinions during meetings.	ES	41%	36%	14%	5%	5%
	SS	33%	36%	22%	7%	2%
Q16: My principal seeks different perspectives when solving problems.	ES	36%	32%	14%	14%	5%
	SS	29%	31%	20%	11%	9%
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q21: During meetings with our principal, teachers are comfortable	ES	14%	59%	18%	5%	5%
giving their unguarded opinions even at the risk of disagreement.	SS	16%	51%	18%	13%	2%
Q26: When teachers at my school meet with our principal, he/she	ES	50%	27%	9%	9%	5%
values the ideas of each teacher.	SS	27%	43%	18%	7%	5%

Elementary School respondents n= 81
Secondary School respondents n = 36
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.2 Survey Responses Related to Teacher Empowerment: Experience

Online Survey Questions	Experience	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q11: My principal solicits teachers' opinions during meetings.	1-5	13%	47%	27%	0	13%
	6-10	46%	8%	15%	31%	0
	11-15	38%	33%	19%	10%	0
	16+	29%	43%	19%	10%	0
Q16: My principal seeks different perspectives when solving problems.	1-5	33%	33%	20%	0	13%
	6-10	38%	0	31%	23%	8%
	11-15	24%	24%	29%	14%	10%
	16+	24%	38%	24%	14%	0
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q21: During meetings with our principal, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions even at the risk of disagreement.	1-5	20%	53%	13%	7%	7%
	6-10	23%	38%	23%	15%	0
	11-15	0	57%	24%	14%	5%
	16+	19%	33%	28%	19%	0
Q26: When teachers at my school meet with our principal, he/she values the ideas of each teacher.	1-5	27%	53%	7%	7%	7%
	6-10	31%	23%	31%	15%	0
	11-15	30%	35%	30%	0	5%
	16+	29%	48%	14%	10%	0

1-5 years of experience n=15
6-10 years of experience n=13
11-15 years of experience n=21
16 years or more of experience n=14
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.3 Survey Responses Relating to Trust: School Type

Online Survey Questions	School Level	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q2: Teachers in my school acknowledge their weaknesses to one another.	ES	5%	43%	33%	19%	0
	SS	2%	39%	48%	9%	2%
Q7: Teachers in my school solicit one another's opinions during meetings.	ES	50%	41%	5%	5%	0
	SS	27%	51%	18%	4%	0
Q9: Teachers in my school offer unprovoked, constructive feedback to one another.	ES	9%	55%	27%	9%	0
	SS	7%	36%	33%	20%	4%
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q23: Teachers in my school ask for help from our principal without hesitation.	ES	45%	27%	14%	9%	5%
	SS	27%	48%	1%	9%	5%
Q28: Teachers in my school are unguarded and genuine with one another.	ES	18%	64%	9%	5%	5%
	SS	16%	56%	24%	4%	2%

Elementary School respondents n= 81
Secondary School respondents n = 36
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.4 Survey Responses Related to Trust: Experience

Online Survey Questions	Experience	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q2: Teachers in my school acknowledge their weaknesses to one another.	1-5	0	40%	40%	13%	7%
	6-10	8%	23%	62%	8%	0
	11-15	0	33%	48%	14%	5%
	16+	10%	40%	30%	15%	5%
Q7: Teachers in my school solicit one another's opinions during meetings.	1-5	40%	33%	13%	13%	0
	6-10	8%	46%	46%	0	0
	11-15	33%	57%	5%	5%	0
	16+	29%	57%	14%	0%	0
Q9: Teachers in my school offer unprovoked, constructive feedback to one another.	1-5	0	53%	33%	33%	0
	6-10	8%	31%	38%	23%	0
	11-15	10%	52%	14%	14%	10%
	16+	5%	19%	43%	24%	10%
Q23: Teachers in my school ask for help from our principal without hesitation.	1-5	20%	47%	20%	7%	7%
	6-10	38%	23%	15%	23%	0
	11-15	30%	35%	20%	10%	5%
	16+	33%	43%	19%	5%	0
Q28: Teachers in my school are unguarded and genuine with one another.	1-5	20%	40%	13%	20%	7%
	6-10	8%	54%	31%	0	8%
	11-15	19%	57%	19%	0	5%
	16+	10%	57%	33%	0	0

1-5 years of experience n=15
6-10 years of experience n=13
11-15 years of experience n=21
16 years or more of experience n=14
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.5   Survey Responses Related to Risk-Safe Environment: School Type

Online Survey Questions	School Type	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q1: Teachers in my school willingly give praise and credit to colleagues.	ES	50%	41%	9%	0	0
	SS	36%	49%	16%	0	0
Q6: Teachers in my school acknowledge and tap into one another's expertise.	ES	59%	41%	0	0	0
	SS	20%	67%	13%	0	0
Q13: During meetings with my principal, difficult issues are discussed.	ES	9%	50%	31%	5%	5%
	SS	13%	47%	24%	11%	4%
Q14: During meetings with my principal, he/she encourages staff members to share ideas, even if they are dissimilar.	ES	13%	50%	27%	5%	5%
	SS	18%	49%	20%	9%	4%
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q21: During meetings with our principal, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions even at the risk of causing disagreement.	ES	14%	50%	18%	4%	4%
	SS	16%	51%	18%	13%	2%

Elementary School respondents n= 81
Secondary School respondents n = 36
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly disagree

Table A.6 Survey Responses Related to Risk-Safe Environment: Experience

Online Survey Questions	Experience	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q1: Teachers in my school willingly give praise and credit to colleagues.	1-5	33%	5%	13%	0	0
	6-10	31%	46%	23%	0	0
	11-15	38%	52%	10%	0	0
	16+	43%	43%	14%	0	0
Q6: Teachers in my school acknowledge and tap into one another's expertise.	1-5	33%	60%	0	7%	0
	6-10	8%	62%	23%	8%	0
	11-15	33%	48%	19%	0	0
	16+	38%	57%	5%	0	0
Q13: During meetings with my principal, difficult issues are discussed.	1-5	13%	40%	27%	13%	7%
	6-10	23%	23%	38%	8%	8%
	11-15	14%	38%	33%	5%	10%
	16+	14%	52%	19%	10%	5%
Q14: During meetings with my principal, he/she encourages staff members to share ideas, even if they are dissimilar.	1-5	20%	40%	27%	0	13%
	6-10	31%	15%	15%	31%	8%
	11-15	19%	38%	33%	5%	5%
	16+	24%	48%	24%	5%	0
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q21: During meetings with our principal, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions even at the risk of causing disagreement.	1-5	20%	53%	13%	7%	7%
	6-10	23%	38%	23%	15%	0
	11-15	0	57%	24%	14%	5%
	16+	19%	33%	28%	19%	0

1-5 years of experience n=15
6-10 years of experience n=13
11-15 years of experience n=21
16 years or more of experience n=14
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly disagree

Table A.7 Survey Responses Related to Conflict: School Type

Online Survey Questions	School Type	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q3. Teacher in my school point out one another's unproductive behaviors.	ES	0	9%	36%	27%	27%
	SS	4%	11%	42%	38%	4%
Q13. During meetings with my principal, difficult issues are discussed.	ES	9%	50%	31%	5%	5%
	SS	13%	47%	24%	11%	4%
Q15. When conflict occurs during meetings, my principal confronts and deals with the issue before moving to another subject.	ES	27%	32%	23%	9%	9%
	SS	20%	20%	38%	13%	9%
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q20. During meetings, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions to each other, even at the risk of causing disagreement.	ES	27%	36%	27%	9%	0
	SS	24%	49%	11%	13%	2%
Q21. During meetings with our principal, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions, even at the risk of causing disagreement.	ES	14%	59%	18%	4%	4%
	SS	15%	51%	18%	13%	2%

Elementary School respondents n= 81
Secondary School respondents n = 36
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly disagree

Table A.8 Survey Responses Related to Conflict: Experience

Online Survey Questions	Experience	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q3: Teachers in my school point out one another's unproductive behaviors.	1-5	0	7%	60%	33%	0
	6-10	15%	38%	38%	8%	0
	11-15	0	14%	43%	19%	24%
	16+	5%	10%	24%	43%	19%
Q13: During meetings with my principal, difficult issues are discussed.	1-5	13%	40%	27%	13%	7%
	6-10	23%	23%	38%	8%	8%
	11-15	14%	38%	33%	5%	10%
	16+	14%	52%	19%	10%	5%
Q15: When conflict occurs during meetings, my principal confronts and deals with the issue before moving to another subject.	1-5	27%	20%	27%	7%	20%
	6-10	31%	15%	23%	23%	8%
	11-15	24%	24%	38%	10%	5%
	16+	24%	14%	43%	14%	5%
Q20: During meetings, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions to each other, even at the risk of causing disagreement.	1-5	20%	53%	13%	7%	7%
	6-10	15%	38%	23%	15%	8%
	11-15	19%	57%	14%	10%	0
	16+	29%	29%	24%	19%	0
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q21: During meetings with our principal, teachers are comfortable giving their unguarded opinions, even at the risk of causing disagreement.	1-5	20%	53%	13%	7%	7%
	6-10	23%	38%	23%	15%	0
	11-15	0	57%	24%	14%	5%
	16+	19%	33%	28%	19%	0

1-5 years of experience n=15
6-10 years of experience n=13
11-15 years of experience n=21
16 years or more of experience n=14
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.9 Survey Responses Related to Work Conflict: School Type

Online Survey Question	School Type	EC	SC	N	SU	EU
Q32: Does conflict with work colleagues make you uncomfortable?	ES	5%	32%	14%	32%	18%
	SS	11%	18%	16%	40%	16%

Elementary School respondents n= 81
Secondary School respondents n = 36
EC = Extremely comfortable, SC = Slightly comfortable, N = Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable, SU = Slightly uncomfortable, EU = Extremely uncomfortable

Table A.10 Survey Responses Related to Work Conflict: Experience

Online Survey Question	Experience	EC	SC	N	SU	EU
Does conflict with work colleagues make you uncomfortable?	1-5	7%	20%	13%	40%	20%
	6-10	23%	0	23%	38%	15%
	11-15	10%	29%	24%	29%	10%
	16+	14%	14%	19%	43%	10%

1-5 years of experience n=15
6-10 years of experience n=13
11-15 years of experience n=21
16 years or more of experience n=14
EC = Extremely comfortable, SC = Slightly comfortable, N = Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable, SU = Slightly uncomfortable, EU = Extremely uncomfortable

Table A.11 Survey Responses Related to Priorities and Vision: School Type

Online Survey Questions	School Type	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q10: Teachers in my school support group decisions, even if they initially disagreed.	ES	27%	55%	14%	0	4%
	SS	14%	48%	34%	2%	2%
Q17: Once a school decision is made, my principal communicates the results and rationale to staff.	ES	55%	18%	9%	18%	0
	SS	49%	27%	13%	2%	9%
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q19: Teachers at my school are clear about our direction and priorities.	ES	41%	27%	14%	9%	9%
	SS	31%	58%	7%	2%	2%
Q22. Teachers in my school ask for help from other teachers without hesitation.	ES	59%	41%	0	0	0
	SS	35%	58%	7%	0	0
Q27: Teachers in my school value collective success more than individual achievement.	ES	36%	50%	14%	0	0
	SS	24%	40%	20%	16%	0

Elementary School respondents n= 81
Secondary School respondents n = 36
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.12 Survey Responses Related to Priorities and Vision: Experience

Online Survey Questions	Experience	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q10: Teachers in my school support group decisions, even if they initially disagreed.	1-5	7%	40%	27%	13%	13%
	6-10	15%	46%	31%	8%	0
	11-15	20%	50%	25%	5%	0
	16+	10%	57%	33%	0	0
Q17: Once a school decision is made, my principal communicates the results and rationale to staff.	1-5	47%	33%	7%	7%	7%
	6-10	54%	8%	23%	15%	0
	11-15	38%	29%	10%	10%	14%
	16+	52%	24%	19%	5%	0
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q19: Teachers at my school are clear about our direction and priorities.	1-5	33%	40%	20%	0	7%
	6-10	15%	69%	0	15%	0
	11-15	29%	48%	10%	5%	10%
	16+	38%	38%	24%	0	0
Q22. Teachers in my school ask for help from other teachers without hesitation.	1-5	33%	67%	0	0	0
	6-10	38%	46%	0	15%	0
	11-15	38%	52%	10%	0	0
	16+	43%	48%	10%	0	0
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q27: Teachers in my school value collective success more than individual achievement.	1-5	13%	47%	13%	27%	0
	6-10	23%	54%	15%	8%	0
	11-15	19%	52%	24%	5%	0
	16-20	43%	29%	21%	7%	0
	21+	29%	48%	10%	14%	0

1-5 years of experience n=15   6-10 years of experience n=13
11-15 years of experience n=21   16 years or more of experience n=14
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.13 Survey Responses Related to Commitment: School Type

Online Survey Questions	School Level	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q5: Teachers in my school leave meetings confident that everyone is committed to the decisions that were agreed upon.	ES	23%	41%	23%	9%	5%
	SS	7%	40%	42%	7%	4%
Q8: Teachers in my school consistently follow through on promises and commitments.	ES	41%	41%	14%	5%	0
	SS	33%	51%	16%	0	0
Q10: Teachers in my school support group decisions even if they initially disagreed.	ES	27%	55%	14%	0	5%
	SS	14%	48%	34%	2%	2%
Q18: Teachers in my school ask for help from our principal without hesitation.	ES	59%	27%	9%	0	5%
	SS	56%	31%	7%	7%	0
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q29: Teachers in my school are willing to rethink decisions when presented with new information.	ES	18%	73%	9%	0	0
	SS	9%	73%	13%	4%	0
Q30: Teachers in my school continually judge the quality of decisions made over time.	ES	14%	64%	14%	9%	0
	SS	22%	69%	9%	0	0

Elementary School respondents n= 81
Secondary School respondents n = 36
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.14 Survey Responses Related to Commitment: Experience

Online Survey Questions	Experience	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q5: Teachers in my school leave meetings confident that everyone is committed to the decisions that were agreed upon.	1-5	13%	33%	33%	7%	13%
	6-10	8%	31%	38%	23%	0
	11-15	10%	38%	38%	10%	5%
	16+	10%	43%	43%	5%	0
Q8: Teachers in my school consistently follow through on promises and commitments.	1-5	33%	40%	27%	0	0
	6-10	31%	19%	31%	0	0
	11-15	33%	48%	14%	5%	0
	16+	29%	57%	14%	0	0
Q10: Teachers in my school support group decisions even if they initially disagreed.	1-5	7%	40%	27%	13%	13%
	6-10	15%	46%	31%	8%	0
	11-15	20%	50%	25%	5%	0
	16+	10%	57%	33%	0	0
		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q18: Teachers in my school ask for help from our principal without hesitation.	1-5	40%	47%	7%	7%	0
	6-10	46%	31%	15%	0	8%
	11-15	52%	38%	5%	0	5%
	16+	52%	33%	10%	5%	0
Q29: Teachers in my school are willing to rethink decisions when presented with new information.	1-5	13%	73%	0	7%	7%
	6-10	8%	69%	23%	0	0
	11-15	24%	52%	19%	5%	0
	16+	24%	67%	10%	0	0

AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.14 Survey Responses Related to Commitment: Experience

		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q30: Teachers in my school continually judge the quality of decisions made over time.	1-5	13%	80%	7%	0	0
	6-10	15%	62%	23%	0	0
	11-15	24%	48%	19%	10%	0
	16+	24%	67%	5%	0	0

1-5 years of experience n=15
6-10 years of experience n=13
11-15 years of experience n=21
16 years or more of experience n=14
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.15 Survey Responses Related to Accountability: School Type

Online Survey Questions	School Type	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q4: Teachers in my school willingly apologize to one another.	ES	23%	23%	50%	5%	0
	SS	16%	27%	47%	11%	0
Q8: Teachers in my school consistently follow through on promises and commitments.	ES	41%	41%	14%	5%	0
	SS	33%	51%	16%	0	0
Q12: During discussions, teachers in my school challenge one another about how they arrived at their conclusions and opinions.	ES	14%	36%	27%	18%	5%
	SS	13%	42%	29%	13%	2%

		SA	A	N	D	SD
Q24: When teachers at my school fail to achieve collective goals, each teacher takes personal responsibility to improve the school's performance.	ES	27%	50%	18%	5%	0
	SS	13%	33%	38%	16%	0
Q25: Teachers in my school are quick to confront peers about problems in their respective areas of responsibility.	ES	9%	27%	41%	18%	5%
	SS	7%	34%	34%	23%	2%

Elementary School respondents n= 81
Secondary School respondents n = 36
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table A.16 Survey Responses Related to Accountability: Experience

Online Survey Questions	Experience	AA	F	O	S	AN
Q4: Teachers in my school willingly apologize to one another.	1-5	27%	13%	60%	0	0
	6-10	15%	0	80%	8%	0
	11-15	19%	43%	29%	10%	0
	16+	19%	33%	43%	5%	0
Q8: Teachers in my school consistently follow through on promises and commitments.	1-5	33%	40%	27%	0	0
	6-10	31%	39%	31%	0	0
	11-15	33%	48%	14%	5%	0
	16+	29%	57%	14%	0	0
Q12: During discussions, teachers in my school challenge one another about how they arrived at their conclusions and opinions.	1-5	13%	47%	27%	13%	0
	6-10	15%	23%	54%	8%	0
	11-15	5%	52%	14%	24%	5%
	16+	10%	24%	48%	19%	0
Q24: When teachers at my school fail to achieve collective goals, each teacher takes personal responsibility to improve the school's performance.	1-5	7%	47%	27%	20%	0
	6-10	15%	46%	23%	15%	0
	11-15	19%	33%	33%	14%	0
	16+	24%	33%	29%	14%	0
Q25: Teachers in my school are quick to confront peers about problems in their respective areas of responsibility.	1-5	13%	40%	27%	20%	0
	6-10	8%	17%	33%	42%	0
	11-15	0	29%	52%	10%	10%
	16+	14%	14%	33%	38%	0

1-5 years of experience n=15
6-10 years of experience n=13
11-15 years of experience n=21
16 years or more of experience n=14
AA = Almost always, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, S = Seldom, AN = Almost never
SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

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