



Receptive Accountability and Professional Capital: An examination of teachers' perceptions in an international school

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with how building professional capital in a school assists a positive change in the teacher's perceptions of themselves and their work environment as a result of addressing school dysfunctionality over time. It examines teachers' perceptions related to the growth of the school's professional capital. This qualitative research examines the responses in two surveys that were completed by a small sample of teachers. By applying development research methodology (OECD, 2002), supported by the use of qualitative data analysis software, an open coding approach enabled rich descriptions and the identification of distinctive and conceptually interdependent categories, themes and trends. This examination found that the vast majority of teachers perceived there to be growth of professional capital over time. An analysis of data indicates that the focus on building professional capital assisted a positive change in teachers' perceptions about their a professional disposition; their working environment; and the school's collective capacity.

Keywords: Receptive accountability, professional capital, school dysfunction, school leadership, organisational change, trust, shared responsibility, teacher professionalism.



Introduction

This study is concerned with a change in teacher perceptions related to the building of professional capital in a school from 2009 to 2012. To follow is a brief account of the contextual features driving the school leadership to address the quality of a school's professional capital and a description of several intervention initiatives designed to assist teachers change their perceptions of themselves and their work environment.

A Need for Change

In 2009, members of the Board and local government authorities had a responsibility to address dysfunctionality in the school they governed (Sell, 2009a, 2009b). They recognised the school had problems with the quality of leadership, management, trust, communication, morale, task coherence and relational connectedness (Consultant Survey, 2008; Sell, 2009a).

Subsequently, the newly appointed school principal developed a strategic approach to school reform by calling to account the quality of the relational and technical dimensions of the organisation (Wheatley, 2011). Wheatley and Dalmau's (1983) idea that sustained and successful organisational change relies on a cohesive alignment between the 'above the green line' technical dimensions (structures, processes and policy) and the 'below the green line' relational dimensions (human transactions) underpinned the implementing of intervention initiatives had an emphasis on building teacher professionalism (Sell, Grimstad, & Williams, 2012).

Intervention Initiatives

Five major intervention initiatives were designed to assist teachers to change their perceptions about themselves and the work environment. These focused on changing how the teachers related to each other and how they acquired and shared professional knowledge. The initiatives changed the purpose of staff meetings; provided a venue to share teacher practice and research; established a workplace agreement; introduced vertically connected whole school learning programs and; redefined the school leadership structures.

Staff Meetings

Rather than a venue for operational discussions, the new staff meetings were designed to increase professional trust and understandings between colleagues. In these meetings peer-to-peer learning and reflection became the focus of the teachers' attention. The staff meeting became a venue for creating agreed expectations about their core business of teaching and learning. Thus, these meetings generated communal frameworks for decision-making and articulated the value and importance of sharing of responsibility.

Education Symposium

The three annual Education Symposiums were convened to provide teachers with a venue to share their knowledge and practices with the broader educational community including academics from several universities (NTNU, 2012). The purpose was to enhance and strengthen the professional confidence and capacities of the teachers.

Local Tariff Agreement

A local tariff agreement was established through a process of collective negotiations between the teachers and the school Board (School, 2011). The aim of this initiative was to create a



sense of collective responsibility within the teacher cohort for redefining their working conditions in collaboration with the governing body. From this agreement came the Staff Recognition Incentive Scheme that rewarded teachers for their participation in collaborative practices (Sell & Williams, 2013).

Whole School Learning Programs

The whole school coherent and vertically connected learning programs were designed to develop two main professional behaviours. First was for all teachers to take responsibility for the student learning and whole school outcomes. Second was to produce shared professional knowledge across the vertical sectors in the school. These programs included a whole school focus on literacy and numeracy skill development, community building, student behaviour management, and daily activity.

Distributive Leadership

A model of distributive leadership (Hallinger & Lee, 2012) was adopted to support the development of changing the working environment by enhancing the leadership capacity within the school. Beyond the restructuring of formal leadership positions, roles and responsibilities classroom teachers lead the development of whole learning school programs, action research projects, and curriculum development.

Literature Review

Recently, Fullan, Rincon-Gallardo, and Hargreaves (2015) advised US educational policy makers to create conditions for effective accountability by calling to account the quality of professional capital in a school. For this to happen school leaders would need to change the organisation of a school by focusing on doing at least three things.

First, they would need to build the collective capacity of teachers so the action of collaboration and sharing responsibility is increased to enhance the school's social capital. Second, they need to enhance the teachers' decision-making capacity so the individual and collective capability to make good decisions in new and unfamiliar contexts increases the school's decisional capital. Third they would need to support individual teacher professional development and learning to enable growth in knowledge, professional experience and confidence that in turn leads to an increase the school's human capital.

Furthermore, Wheatley (2011) posits that successful organisational change requires alignment between the technical and relational dimensions of the organisation. The technical dimension is concerned with the organisational structures, policy, procedures, process, and strategies while the relational dimension is concerned with the multitude of relational transactions that make up the human activity within an organisation. Effective alignment occurs when the interplay between the technical and relational dimensions is congruent in its purpose and action.

To follow is a brief overview of some of the literature related to accountability, school dysfunction, professional capital, and organisational change related to the context of this examination.



Accountability

Jeremiah Day, (1838), first wrote about internal accountability as being contingent on one's self-determination to take responsibility in accordance with their will rather than referenced against the external will of God. While Day considered the internal and external accountability forms incompatible, Fishbough (1843) saw it differently. He explains, although humans are bound by and accountable to natural law making them 'measurably dependent upon' each other it is by the 'same law' that they 'posses common sympathies and interest(s)' (p. 223). Fishbough believed that God's external truth and the internal moral truths are compatible.

Over one hundred and fifty years later, according to Sahlberg (2008) accountability remains a social construct defined by a set of external or internal explanations of the truth and possible contingencies. Sahlberg (2008) identified the emergence of an educational dilemma for many schools related to the 'external productivity demands on the one hand, while simultaneously teaching for a knowledge society with moral purpose?' (p. 48). This dilemma may due to evidence showing that concentrated external accountability forms have saturated the fabric of school life (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2015; Elmore, 2005; Figlio & Loeb, 2011; Fullan et al., 2015; Sahlberg, 2008) making accountability compatibility difficult. Levitt, Janta, and Wegrich (2008) found some external accountability forms have contributed 'towards de-professionalisation of professionals and a slow decline of the professional authority' (p. 24). In some schools pressure to score well in standardised testing (a contingency of external accountability) has reduced trust between the school and its community and contributed to a deskilling of the profession (Fitz, 2003).

For Sahlberg (2008) one way to address the educational dilemma is to design and implement effective school accountability where truth is arrived at through participatory processes consisting of '... self-evaluations, critical reflection and school-community interaction' (Sahlberg, 2008 p. 54). Additionally, evidence suggests that teachers working in schools with strong internal accountability are driven to build shared understanding of, and responsibility for, their profession (Elmore, 2005; Fullan et al., 2015; Sahlberg, 2008). Therefore, if school leaders focused on building strong internal accountability the capacity for the school to function effectively is enhanced.

School Dysfunction

In a school dysfunctional characteristics include ineffective leadership (Christie & Lingard, 2001); 'unstable management conditions' (Pretorius, 2014 p. 54); a lack of trust; poor communication; low staff morale; time and energy spent on tasks unrelated to the core mission of the school; ethical deterioration and teachers leaving or wanting to leave (Green & O'Sullivan, 2009). Based on the research by Green and O'Sullivan (2009) addressing dysfunctionality requires systems thinking, building trust and focusing on valuing ethical behaviours.

Professional Capital

According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) professional capital consists of three interrelated capitals: human, social and decisional. Human capital relates to the teachers' expertise; their



professional qualifications and knowledge; their empathy for students and colleagues and the nature of interpersonal relationships. Social capital relates to the teachers' collective capacity to work together and share responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions and behaviours. Good social capital sees the quality of interpersonal transactions that enable collaborative practices and the building of trust across multi-dimensional areas within a school. Decisional capital relates to capacities of the individual within the organisation to make wise and informed decisions in complex and often unfamiliar situations. Specific elements in decisional capital include the quality of reflective practices, the use of research to inform practice and shared and agreed frameworks that guide the decision making process in the school.

According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) the quality of the three capitals shapes the quality of the professional capital in the school. They suggest by building professional capital in a school it is possible for teachers to strengthen their collective capacity.

Organisational Change

Wheatley (2011) describes how, when there is an alignment between the technical and relational dimensions of an organisation, the chance of successful change improves. The technical dimension is concerned with the organisational structures, policy, procedures, process, and strategies while the relational dimension is concerned with multitude of relational transactions that make up the human activity within an organisation.

In a school the curriculum frameworks, professional development programs, workforce structures, communication protocols, whole school programs, procedures such as timetables and calendars make up the technical dimension. While transactions related to building trust, making decisions, reflecting on practice, collaborating with colleagues and the act of teaching reside within the relational dimension.

Wheatley suggests that the association between the technical and relational dimensions of an organisation influences the success or otherwise of changing its environment. The two dimensions interweave and influence each other. Thus, building professional capital requires applying a systematic approach to aligning the technical and relational dimensions with this intent in mind.

Theoretical Framework

If a leader is to effectively assist a positive change in teachers' perceptions about themselves and their work environment then it follows they need strong internal accountability to support the building of professional capital within the school. There is also a supposition embedded in this examination specifying that if professional capital in a school grows so to does the teachers' positive perception about themselves and their work environment.

Receptive Accountability

From 2009 to 2012, the idea of receptive accountability evolved as a reference point for understanding the quality of professional capital in the school (Sell et al., 2012). Subsequently it was realised that the three elements of receptive accountability: individual



accountability, shared responsibility and anticipatory responsiveness had some congruence with the three elements of professional capital: human, social and decisional.

With the notion that ‘all accountability relationships are reciprocal (Elmore, 2000 p. 21)’ this accountability form was designed to be receptive to the internal needs of the teacher and the school (Sell, 2014). In this sense, receptive accountability is responsive and sensitive to the contextual features of the school and is embedded in the day-to-day realities of the teachers’ working day. It provides an internal framework for measuring and judging individual and collective performance in the school (Sell, 2014).

Table 1: The relationship between the three elements of receptive accountability and the three elements of professional capital capitals in terms of actions and outcomes is outlined below.

ACTION		OUTCOME
Individual Accountability Personal and professional learning and experiential knowledge about teaching, learning, curriculum, relationships.		Human Capital The qualities of the individual as recognised through credentials and experience.
Shared Responsibility Working as a team, collaborating, participating in peer to peer learning and sharing responsibility for outcomes and achievements.		Social capital The qualities of the group as recognised through the level of collective capacity and collaborative professional interactions.
Anticipatory Teacher Responsiveness Using discretionary judgement; adopting a futures orientation and evidence informed approaches to decision making. Anticipating and responding to the future needs of students and the school.		Decisional Capital Qualities of judgement and expertise as recognised through the individuals and groups capacities to make more effective decisions over time

Adopted from Sell (2013, 2014) and Fullan et al. (2015)

The Research Problem and Question

Today’s increasingly complex school environments (OECD/CERI, 2007; Schleicher 2012) have precipitated the need for teachers to change their thinking and behaviours related to their profession (OECD, 2008). In remedying a dysfunctional school an emphasis on changing the nature of transactional behaviours between teachers is a priority. In these circumstances the building of professional capital is seen as one way of improving the relational behaviours of teachers.

However, enhancing professional capital in a school is not as straightforward as it seems. Teacher behaviours need to continuously adapt to changing expectations and new experiences. Within this context, the problem focuses on whether the building of professional capital assists a positive change teachers’ perceptions about themselves and their work environment as well as examining to what extent the teachers’ perceived the growth of the professional capital in the school.

Therefore, the main research question was:



Does being accountable for the building professional capital in a school assist a positive change in the teacher's perceptions of themselves and their work environment?

Research Methodology and Methods

Methodology

This research is designed to enable practitioners to interpret the findings so they can generate new knowledge and applications specific to their context. This examination's qualitative methodology is based on the principles of development research (OECD, 2008) and the traditions of practitioner inquiry (OECD, 2002). In conducting a systematic inquiry and reflective practices this examination builds a confirmable, transferable, dependable and credible (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2005) examination of a specific phenomenon involving a few people within a single organisation (Yin, 2003).

The findings are drawn from a methodical and organised examination of existing knowledge within the organisation that was derived from research and practical experience of the researcher as a participant in the research. The examination aims to produce new ideas and understanding to support practicing school leaders to design innovative and participatory solutions to their contemporary problems (Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003). As such, this examination is a micro study of one element that could lead to generation of other creative processes in schools.

Methods

With such a small sample population a statistically testable analysis is not possible. Therefore a mixed-methods interpretative inquiry approach that utilised qualitative and quantitative data collection was used (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman 2007). This approach provides rich information to better understand the complex perceptions of participants (Bevir & Rhodes 2002., Denzin 2002., Zhou, & Creswell 2012). This inquiry examined a survey that consisted of two sections asking the teachers to rate the growth of three elements of professional capital on a Likert scale over time and a self-administered questionnaire asking for written feedback about what they learnt and developed in reference to the three capitals.

Sampling

Teachers directly associated with the delivery of the curriculum responded to two surveys conducted between October 2012 and April 2013.

- Survey 1:
- a) Level of Professional Capital Over Time (October 2012)
 - b) Level of Professional Capital: Feedback from Teachers
- Total of 15 respondents (75%) of a possible population of 20.

Design and Analysis

For consistency each respondent received the same instructions and information. The surveys and questionnaire were designed to include questions capable of measurement (Holstein 1997) and an opportunity to triangulated responses. Using qualitative data analysis software



(MAXQDA, 2015) an open coding approach was adopted to identify distinctive and conceptually interdependent categories, themes and trends in the data. Triangulation by comparing the responses was used to identify commonalities and discrepancies, and to check for significant contradictions.

Limitations

This examination should be considered in light of limitations embedded in it. The findings and the implications of this study are restricted by the author's own situational participation in the research context. As the author of this study and as the principal of the school, the past experiences and knowledge of the school, its operations, context, and personal relations influenced how the study is conceived and conducted. As such, it is likely that some responses may have been inhibited.

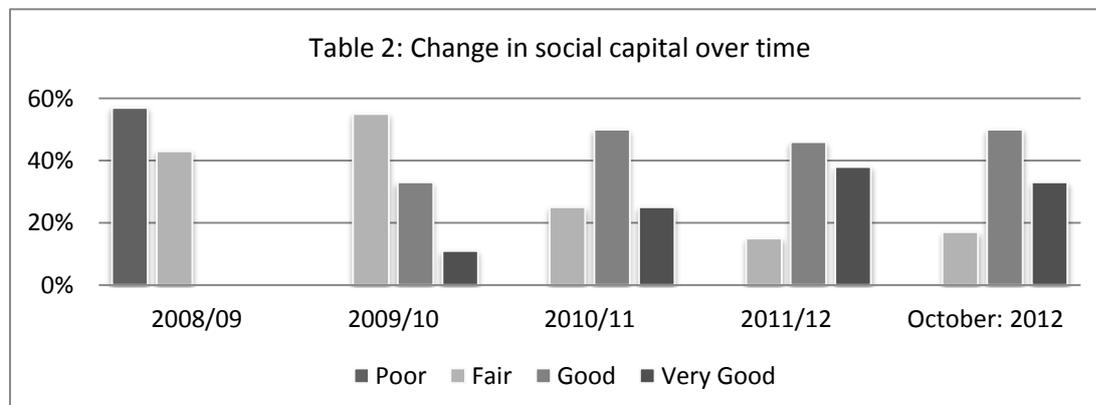
In addition, the focus of the questions, aimed at understanding the growth and development, limited the respondents' inclination to provide their negative perceptions. With this in mind it is reasonable to assume there were negative teacher perceptions related to the intervention initiatives designed to build professional capital in the school.

As a result of the small sample size the extent to which findings can be generalised is very limited. The strength of the findings related to teacher perceptions remains open to further scrutiny and a deeper investigation to augment their validity.

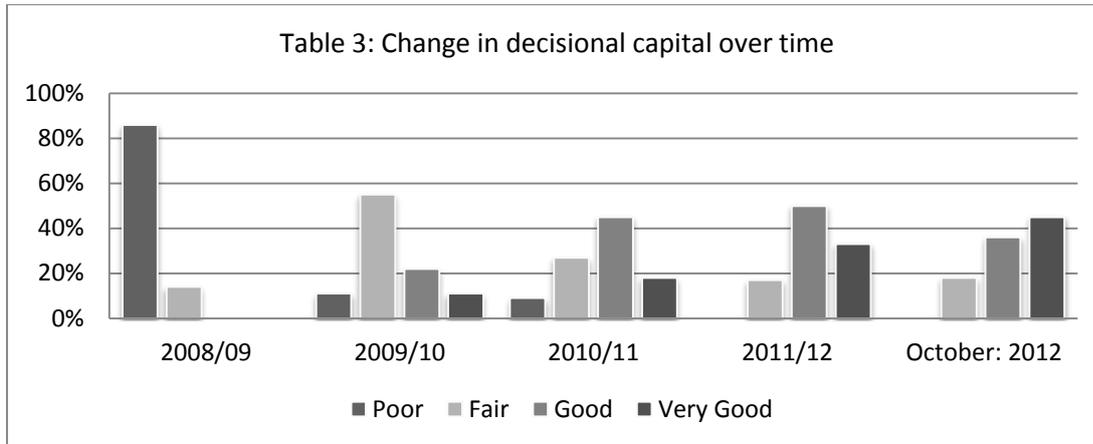
Findings

Change over time

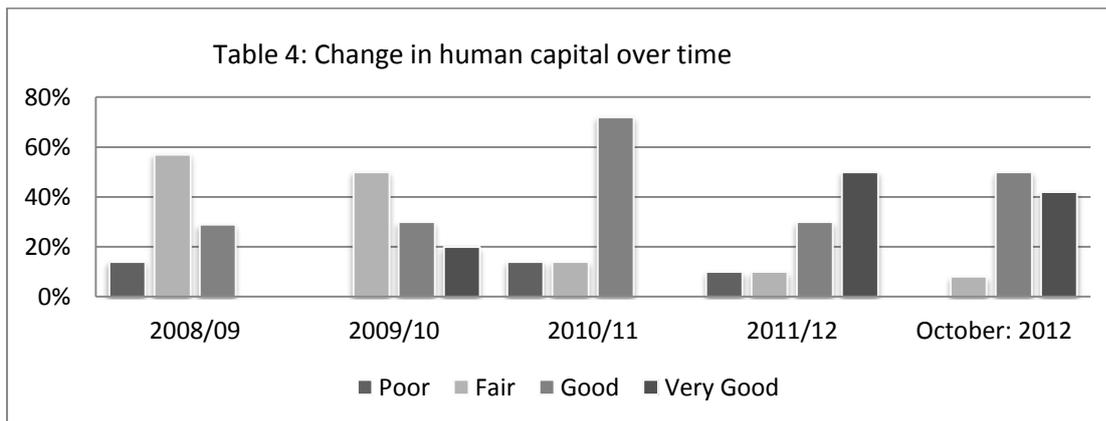
Overall, the teachers' perceived positive growth in the human, social, and decisional capital over time (refer to the tables below). The teachers, who were working at the school in 2008/09, rated the level of social and decisional capitals as poor to fair at that time. By 2011/2012, the vast majority of teachers perceived the level of these two capitals to be good to very good.



A noticeable positive change was seen in the rating of decisional capital when just under 85% of respondents rated it as poor in 2008/09 compared to over 80% rating it as good to very good by October 2012.



The change in the rating related to the level of human capital was not as great as the social and human capitals although improvement was evident with 30% of teachers rating human capital in the school as poor to fair in 2008/09 compared to an 80% of respondents rating human capital in by 2011-2012 as good to very good.



Relational and Technical Categories

An analysis of over 360 written comments shows that approximately 54% are associated with the relational dimension with 46% associated with the technical dimension. The main themes in the relational category related to decision-making, professional learning and development, pedagogy and collaboration. The main themes in the technical category related to structures, frameworks, and policies that guided and supported the curriculum implementation, teacher professional learning and development, and the building of whole school programs and events.

Relational Dimension

An examination of the comments in the relational category showed that teachers perceived growth on an individual and collective level. In general the teachers noted a positive change in their perceptions related to decision-making; collaboration and sharing responsibility; professionalism; whole school programs and events; and communication.



On balance the majority of teachers indicated positive growth in the level of decisional capital citing an increased level of trust; using an empathic lens when making decisions and referencing decisions against agreed and shared frameworks in their capacity to make decisions as contributing factors. There was commentary from more than one teacher suggesting teachers are trusted 'to make decisions'.

The vast majority of teachers recognized a positive change in the school's social capital as described through many comments related to the growth and power of collaboration and the sharing of responsibility. One teacher feels the school encourages them 'to seek guidance and exchange experiences with other teachers through collaborative planning and day to day work'. One teacher observed 'that the school has a positive attitude that makes teachers work to improve their work and help out others through sharing experiences'. Teachers also claimed they had become 'better team member(s) and more open minded towards other people's point of views'. Summed up teachers had learnt 'how to interact with colleagues, to help them' as well as themselves 'to develop as a teacher'.

In the main, the majority of teachers indicated they have an 'understanding that we (they) can learn from each other' because it seems there is 'increased openness to learn from each other'. The school became a place where 'the staff comes together much more as a team' to plan and organise programs and events. While other teachers commented they had 'become a better team member' and they had 'learnt to work in a team'

Notably, teachers generally perceived a positive change in how they viewed themselves as professionals commenting they 'are working more in the professional domain' with one teacher observing that teachers are 'becoming more professional in how we can put personal issues and differences aside...'. Comments indicating that teachers had 'more independence', 'increased professional competency' and the 'interactions (between teachers) have become more professional' suggest that some teachers perceived the growth in professionalism as positive. On a personal level some teachers noted they became more patient, flexible, creative, and divergent in their thinking.

Another common theme to emerge was that as a result of building professional capital teachers are motivated to improve their practice and a perception that they are 'better prepared when meeting parents, less intimidated'. One teacher noted: 'I want to be the best teacher I can be, looking at how others work to see what I can learn from them' with some others claiming to have improved their teaching expertise over time.

It was evident that teachers perceived that sharing the workload, ideas, perspectives and experiences had brought them together. This sharing was the catalyst for creating binding expectations within the group that led to teachers 'Think(ing) and act (ing) as a whole' with an observation that 'people are more on the same page'. For example, teachers 'now have a shared responsibility for literacy. The school now owns the planning of the Units of Inquiry, not individual teachers.' Teaching 'strategies that are known by everybody and are used across the school'. One teacher valued 'being a part of building up a successful school'.

Many teachers comment positively on the improvement in the communication protocols and decision-making capacities within the staff. It seems now 'everyone talks to each other' to a



point where the staff are ‘collaborating and communicating professionally with everyone including colleagues’ they ‘don’t get along with’. One teacher noted they had learnt how ‘to interact better and more efficiently with colleagues’.

Technical Dimension

A large majority of teachers considered the involvement in the development of curriculum programs and whole school events in a positive light. They valued the structures, such as planning formats, content scope and sequences and criteria assessment rubrics, which support the effective delivery of the programs. Statements like ‘the system for benchmarking helps with assessment’; ‘I have a better understanding of how to integrate the arts into the curriculum’; the ‘IB philosophy-it is a total revolution in assessment and planning’ and; we have ‘a place to store Units of Inquiry and everyone taking responsibility to ensure they are there’ indicate structured programs and support frameworks were valued by the teachers.

Many teachers valued the process of peer-to-peer professional learning within an action research-learning framework. Some noted the education symposium as important to them because of its the capacity to publish and present their research. For other teachers the whole school programs and events gave them a chance to put ‘whole-school theory into practice’ and an opportunity to, ‘develop a program’ and share in the ‘organising of big happenings. These professional development programs focused on such things as pedagogy, divergent thinking, assessment and ‘targeted instruction’. In one case these whole school literacy program led to ‘reading strategies that are known by everybody and are used across the school’.

Teachers noted an improvement in the quality of communication with one believing there was a ‘positive communication structure among peers’ and another observing ‘we have a clearer structure; we know who is supposed to do what’. A few teachers suggested the communication channels were clearer as the ‘chain of command (is) mapped out’. Another stating ‘I make decisions within the frameworks, knowing my decisions will be within guidelines and therefore will be backed up by school community.

Negative Comments

Only one teacher provided a negative perception by noting: ‘We do have collaborative planning which is a very good idea. But I often have the feeling that we start something and leave it half way because next time we meet we have to do something else. More structure and defined goals for each meeting would be helpful for us in order to finish what we start’.

Conclusion

To emerge from this examination is an apparent link between building professional capital in a school to address dysfunctionality and in doing so assist a positive change in the teachers’ perceptions of themselves and their work environment.

All schools have specific contextual features that influence and impact on how a school leader responds to internal problems. Given the findings of this examination a chief



consideration for a leader, who is tasked with reforming a dysfunctional school, would be to address the misalignments that reside in the technical and relational dimensions.

The intervention initiatives studied in this examination provided structure and spaces where relational and technical alignment occurred. Subsequently, the alignment between the dimensions was intuitively recognized and valued by teachers as contributing to their perceptions in relation to individual and collective professional growth.

Finally, although little mention was made of accountability by teachers it seems sensible, from a leaders point of view at least, to have an internal accountability framework as reference point for making decisions related to building professional capital in a school. Given the task of school reform is difficult and complex this research attempts to provide empirical evidence to support school leaders when making decisions about future action.

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