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Trust and Go: Enhancing Collaborative School Cultures through Improv

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Abstract

Contemporary educational leaders are tasked with supporting their teams, with limited time and resources, to unite and thrive through political, social, economic, and environmental instability. Educational scholars and leaders agree upon the need to foster collaboration within school communities; the practices for achieving this outcome are not always clear. The primary research question of my integrative literature review is: *How can improvisational theory support educational leaders to enhance collaboration within school cultures?* Secondary questions include:

1) *What are the guiding principles of improvisation?*
2) *What does the research reveal about leading collaboration within schools?*
3) *What practices surface because of this research?*

I conducted an integrative literature review and used thematic analysis within a constructivist approach to examine whether the principles of improvisation can offer leaders insight into practices for establishing and sustaining collaborative school cultures. Improvisational theatre offers leaders a lens to examine the work of developing and sustaining collaborative cultures. After an extensive review of two bodies of literature, I identified four themes common to improvisation and leading collaborative school cultures: *Connect, Define the Rules, Share the Lead,* and *Play the Game.* Nested within each of these themes, I uncovered eight practices school-based leaders can apply to enhance their school's collaborative cultures: *Use Time and Space Creatively; Create Opportunities for Meaningful Dialogue; Co-create Norms; Articulate Vision, Values, and Goals; Integrate Evidence-Informed Pedagogical Practices; Provide Shared Leadership*; *Amplify Strengths;* and *Fail Forward.* The model that emerged from this research will prove useful to school-based administrators and other leaders looking to empower their teams to solve problems and innovate in community.

Keywords: collaboration, improvisation, innovation, leadership practices, risk-taking, school culture, trust

Imagine a school in which the staff and students share their ideas freely, build on each other's thinking, and prioritize one another's success—a school where each member is valued, mistakes are welcomed as opportunities for growth, and curiosity, inquiry, and innovation flourish. Through performing and training other actors in improvisation, I have reached the same conclusion as Leonard and Yorton (2015): "If you can create an ensemble where everyone agrees to surrender the need to be right, you will increase productivity by leaps and bounds. You will create an

environment where innovation can flourish; you will also make everyone happier" (p. 75). As an educational leader, I am passionate about developing collaborative school cultures and believe improvisational theory casts light on practices that school-based leaders can employ to enhance collaboration within their schools. Improvisers embrace fear, take risks, capitalize on failure, and build on the ideas of others. These are also descriptors that apply to collaborative school cultures. "The relationship between improvisation and leadership has rarely been directly studied" (Gagnon et al., p. 304). Through this integrative literature review, I examine the intersection where improvisation and school culture meet.

Context

Within the context of a pandemic, an environmental crisis, and a society coming to grips with inequities such as systemic racism, homophobia, and sexism, it is perhaps more important than ever that school leaders intentionally build resilient school cultures in which their staff feel safe, seen, heard, and valued. Collectively, they need to feel aligned with a shared vision, and empowered to innovate. The global pandemic has exacerbated already ambiguous and trying times—politically, socially, economically, and environmentally; we will not be able to solve the problems within our educational system in silos. We need to get creative, and "creativity is about making connections and is usually driven more by collaboration than by solo efforts" (Robinson, 2010, p. 211). Creativity and collaboration are key competencies in the 21st century because "when we collaborate, creativity unfolds across people; the sparks fly faster, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (Sawyer, 2017, p. 7). The work of leading collaboration is not solely the responsibility of school principals. For the purposes of this research, I concur with Brené Brown's (2019) definition of a leader as "anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential" (p. 4).

Generally, educational scholars and leaders agree upon the need to foster collaboration within school communities. Hattie (2015), for example, asserts that "we must stop allowing teachers to work alone, behind closed doors and in isolation in the staffrooms and instead shift to a professional ethic that emphasizes collaboration" (p. 23). The challenge is that collaboration is not always a priority. Limited time and resources, pressure to focus squarely on delivering high achievement results, and a lack of clarity around practices for achieving successful collaboration can halt progress. Improvisation provides a comprehensive model that addresses many of the issues facing educators today, as it "can help build trust, increase collaboration and team building, improve communication skills, promote innovation and creativity, improve tolerance to ambiguity and change, and help leaders feel more self-confident, open, and less afraid to take risks" (Kip, 2014, p. 12).

An overview of the literature on both "teacher collaboration" and "improvisation" reveals a large body of qualitative and quantitative research on leading collaborative school cultures, as well as several studies related to applying improvisational practices within workplace settings. Further, existing research confirms there are aspects of improvisational theory that can inform school leadership and enhance school culture. Magni et al. (2013), for example, noted the "positive effect of empowering leadership on the improvisation-performance link" (p. 730). Nir et al. (2016) corroborate that "improvisation and creativity, in particular, are of value when principals need to bridge a gap between top-down demands, changing circumstances and local expectations and, at the same time, increase the effectiveness of their school" (p. 276). Developed through improvisation, "tacit knowledge … rational thinking, and creativity are essential to promote school leaders' coping capacity with changing circumstances, pressures, and constraints and, at the same time, promote their tendency to improvise and initiate creative solutions" (Nir et al., 2016, p. 276).

However, there is not a significant amount of research around using improvisation to enhance school culture or studies connecting improvisational theory with developing collaborative cultures in schools. Through this review, I seek to deeply investigate the connection between collaborative practice on the stage and in schools.

Improvisers are actors who train to adapt to unforeseen circumstances, collaborate to spontaneously tell stories, build on one another's ideas, and see opportunity in unlikely situations. Today's school-based leaders are tasked with leading their school communities through uncharted waters with extremely limited resources. They are forced to adapt to unimaginable conditions, often with very little information and without the proper resources, to support their staff and students. The literature on improvisation offers leaders a potential path forward during these uncertain times.

Problem of Practice & Research Questions

Most school-based leaders value collaboration. The problem is that they often lack the time and resources to enact and refine this crucial practice. They need concrete, efficient methods for supporting collaboration within their schools. I hypothesized that improvisation principles might offer insights into the "how" of this problem of practice. This research took the form of an integrative literature review to address the question: *How can improvisational theory support educational leaders to enhance collaboration within school cultures?* The secondary questions include:

1) *What are the guiding principles of improvisation?*
2) *What does the research reveal about leading collaboration within schools?*
3) *What practices surface because of this research?*

I analyzed contemporary interpretivist research on collaboration and improvisational theory to uncover accessible leadership practices that foster trusting relationships and inspire risk-taking and innovation in schools.

Methodology

Integrative Literature Review

Through my research, I used a constructivist approach to examine the relationship between leading collaboration within schools and the art form of improvisation. I utilized a mixed research approach for my integrative literature review because collaborative school cultures and improvisation can be nebulous concepts that are challenging to measure and understand. Onwuegbuzie and Frels (2016) explain that "the most rigorous of literature reviews utilize mixed research techniques and, thus, represent mixed research studies" (p. 12). By drawing from qualitative and quantitative research, I "provide the most informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results" (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 129).

As for my methodology, I accessed seminal and recent improvisation literature to establish a working definition of improvisation and the generally agreed-upon principles it encompasses. Next, I surveyed research about leading collaboration within schools. As there is a great deal of research on this topic, I selected sources based on what was most relevant and informative (Belcher, 2019, p. 179). Overall, I remained responsive to what emerged from the research, uncovered connections, and generated new understandings to support leaders hoping to bolster collaborative practices in their schools.

Methods

Data Collected

To test my hypothesis that the principles of improvisation can offer a lens through which to examine school leadership practices, I collected and analyzed data from the literature, written from 2010 to 2020, on the practice of improvisational theatre as well as research on leading collaborative cultures within schools. The primary search engines for my research included: The University of Calgary Library Base, The Education Research Information Center-ERIC, Google Scholar, and Google.

First, I reviewed biographic, educational, and seminal texts from practitioners and educators on the topic of improvisational theory and practice. I chose biographic texts to align with the interpretivist paradigm of the research. Keywords included: arts, drama, improv, improvisation, and theatre. Given that modern theatrical improvisational games evolved out of the arts communities in Canada and the United States, I chose from texts written by North American authors and researchers.

Next, I reviewed research about leading collaboration within school cultures. These texts included both qualitative and quantitative studies that were contemporary and peer-reviewed, with an emphasis on interpretivist research within North America and Europe, where the educational context is comparable to that of my home province, Alberta. Keywords included: collaboration, education, innovation, leadership, and school culture. Finally, I looked at any research that already connects aspects of improvisational theory and collaboration within schools.

Thematic Analysis

From the literature, I identified key citations and gathered a general summary of each author and researcher's key ideas. I examined the research for patterns and noted relationships

between my findings and the earlier identified improvisation principles. Given the unique structure of my research plan, I drew from Machi and McEvoy's (2017) advice for authors of complex literature reviews. Within Machi and McEvoy's (2017) model, I primarily engaged in thematic analysis, which is "a qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions, … [offering] a highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). I continuously referred to my research questions to keep my research project consistent and coherent, while being flexible and responsive to the findings.

First, I sorted the improvisation research and identified four principles of improvisation: *Connect, Define the Rules, Share the Lead,* and *Play the Game*. Next, I analyzed the research around leadership practices that support collaboration and loosely organized them into themes. Finally, I organized the leadership themes under the improvisation principles. During this process, I moved between Step 2 and Step 4 of the Machi and McEvoy model (2017).

Findings

The Guiding Principles of Improvisation

Defining Improvisation

The literature revealed several complementary definitions for improvisation. Alda (2017) describes it as "a particular kind of theatre training—games and exercises that enable you to open up to another person, to tune into them, to engage with them in a dance of ideas and feelings, and to go anywhere it takes you, together" (p. 4) and Nisula and Aino (2017) describe "a collective activity in which a group of actors perform together — with no script or director — in a spirit of shared leadership, responsibility, mutual support and care" (p. 485). Viola Spolin (1963), known

as the mother of improvisation, emphasized the spontaneous quality of improvisation, pointing out that “through spontaneity, we are reformed into ourselves” (p. 4).

The definition that most informed this framework comes from inspiring educator and academic Dorothy Heathcote (1991) who defined improvisation as “discovering by trial, error and testing, using available materials with respect for their nature, and being guided by this appreciation of their potential” (p. 44).

Benefits of Improvisation

Just a few of improvisation’s many benefits include its ability to “help build trust, increase collaboration and team building, improve communication skills, promote innovation and creativity, improve tolerance to ambiguity and change, and help leaders feel more self-confident, open, and less afraid to take risks” (Kip, 2014, p. 12). Through their investigation of the effects of improvisational theatre on organizational creativity, Nisula and Aino (2017) discovered that “theatrical improvisation training can lead to sustainable changes at many levels of an organisation [and] act as a pattern breaker and an eye opener, thus both releasing and stimulating an individual's intrinsic creativity” (p. 490), all the while stimulating “creativity by breaking down individual barriers and increasing individuals' and groups' openness to novelty” (p. 486). Similarly, Gagnon (2012) lists “maintaining an external focus, openness, listening and responsiveness, and an ability to create trust and ‘action space’ for collective development of new ideas, approaches, methods, and outcomes ‘inside the box’” (p. 305) as some of improvisations many gifts. Heathcote (1991) most succinctly shares “wherever understanding of human behaviour, feelings, hopes, and attitudes is required [improvisation] will function speedily and efficiently” (p. 45).

Guiding Principles of Improvisation

Improv ensembles, groups of improvisors who perform together, establish trusting relationships with one another and rely on those as a means for leaping into the work of performing. Broadly speaking, improvisors must *trust* and *go*. These concepts are exemplified in the motto of Poeler's (2014) theatre troupe, Upright Citizens Brigade: "Don't think. Get out of your head. Stop planning and just go" (p. 209). The idea is to embrace spontaneity, "the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly" (Spolin, 1963, p. 4), and go before you are ready. The literature on improvisation shows that, in order to *trust* and *go*, improvisers follow the guiding principles of improvisation; they *Connect*, *Define the Rules*, *Share the Lead*, and *Play the Game*.

Connect

The beginning point for improvisation is building connections based on trust. Spolin (1963) explains "improvisational theater requires very close group relationships because it is from group agreement and group playing that material evolves" (pp. 9-10). She elaborates that "group participation and group freedom remove all the imposed tensions and exhaustions of the competitiveness and open the way for harmony" (p. 10). Listening is foundational for building connections within the ensemble, as "true relating and responsive listening… is necessary on the stage and in life as well" (Alda, 2017, p. 8). So too is putting the needs of the group ahead of those of the individual. "It's your job to make your partner look good and if you are afraid to look stupid you should probably go home. Improvisation is not about being cool" (Poehler, 2014, p. 116). Improvisers comfortably give, take, and share focus. Within an improv ensemble, "the group's goals trump the individual's … there is enough credit for all, and … candor is rewarded, not punished" (Leonard & Yorton, 2015, p. 14). Performing from within an ensemble can be incredibly

liberating, as “it’s easier to be brave when you’re not alone” (Poehler, 2014, p. 122). Once trusting relationships have been established, “a great group can propel its members forward so that they achieve amazing things” (Johnstone, 1979, p. 21).

Define the Rules

Before we play a game, we must know the rules. In improvisation, “there must be group agreement on the rules of the game and group interaction moving towards the objective if the game is to be played” (Spolin, 1963, p. 5). When the rules are defined and agreed upon by all players, they are free to move right up to the edge of those rules and to push the boundaries. Interestingly, the restrictions dictated by the rules are what feed the creativity of the performers. Spolin (1963) explains “the energy released to solve the problem, being restricted by the rules of the game and bound by group decision, creates an explosion—or spontaneity—and as is the nature of explosions, everything is torn apart, rearranged, unblocked” (p. 6).

Structure also invites playfulness. “Ingenuity and inventiveness appear to meet any crisis the game presents, for it is understood during playing that a player is free to reach the game’s objective in any style he chooses” (Spolin, 1963, p. 5). The rules are essential as they not only provide structure but also invite creativity and play; before “we can play ..., we must feel free to do so” (Spolin, 1963, p. 6). Paradoxically, defining the constraints of the game offers freedom to the improvisers to explore the frontiers and find the fun.

Share the Lead

Improvisers take, give, and share the lead seamlessly. “Improvisational theatre is highly egalitarian; there is no single, formal leader, and responsibility for the outcome is wholly shared” (Gagnon, 2012, p. 305). One of the more popular mantras in classic improvisation is *Yes, And.* Agree with your partner’s offer and build on their idea. As Tina Fey (2012) explains, “the rule of

agreement reminds you to ‘respect what your partner has created’ and to at least start from an open-minded place. Start with a YES and see where that takes you” (p. 76). Improvisation is very much about accepting what is offered, relinquishing control, and trusting in the process. Sharing the lead also means attending to the present selflessly, or what Spolin (1999) called following the follower. In reflecting on her time performing with improvisational comedy enterprise, *Second City*, Amy Poehler recalls that “being ‘clever’ wasn’t rewarded. It was about being in the moment and listening and not being afraid” (Poehler, 2014, p. 116). A benefit of surrendering control is there is no need to shoulder all of the responsibility for a scene or story. Improvisers “bring a brick, not a cathedral” (Leonard & Yorton, 2015, p. 42) and trust that by sharing the lead, the product will reveal itself in due time.

Play the Game

The real fun begins in the improvisation game when trusting relationships are established, the rules are defined, and the players agree to surrender the lead. Improvisers are masters at following the fear, failing forward, and building on one another’s ideas to solve problems. As Halpern, et al. (2011) explain, “You bring a brick, and I bring a brick. Then together, we build a house. You wouldn't bring in your entire house and slap it on top of mine. Together, moment by moment, we build a scene” (p. 32).

Improvisers are trained to follow their impulses, embrace spontaneity and recognize when to join the game. Poehler (2014) recalls the advice of here director, Del Close, “fall, and then figure out what to do on your way down” (p. 120). In his book, *Impro*, pioneering Canadian improv educator, Keith Johnston (1979) offers:

> I’m teaching spontaneity, and therefore I tell them that they mustn’t try to control the future, or to ‘win’; and that they’re to have an empty head and just watch. When it’s their

> turn to take part they're to come out and just do what they're asked to and see what happens. It's this decision not to try and control the future which allows the students to be spontaneous. (Johnston, 1979, p. 24)

Failure is an inevitable and celebrated part of the improvisation game. What if the improviser makes a mistake? With the right mindset and the right scene partners, mistakes are not possible. For one thing, "if everyone justifies everyone else's actions, there are no mistakes" (Halpern et al., 2011, p. 45). For another, mistakes are often the birthplace of innovation. "In improv, there are no mistakes, only beautiful happy accidents. And many of the world's greatest discoveries have been made by accident" (Fey, 2012, p. 78).

Despite the inevitable fears and failures, improvisers push forward. They rely on one another to move the story forward, protect one another from fears, and flip failures into carefully crafted and creative successes. Tina Fey (2012) advises, "it's your responsibility to contribute. Always make sure you're adding something to the discussion" (p. 77). Challenges are inevitable, so "whatever the problem, be part of the solution. Don't just sit around raising questions and pointing out obstacles" (Fey, 2012, p. 77). Improvisers are dedicated collaborators, perpetual optimists, bold dreamers, quick thinkers, and relentless builders of worlds.

Leading Collaboration within Schools

Defining Collaborative School Cultures

The research surfaced a definition of collaborative cultures within schools as "the shared values, norms and practices on the matter of teamwork and communication" (Meredith et al., 2017, p. 25). Collaborative school cultures "accumulate and circulate knowledge and ideas, as well as assistance and support, [help] teachers become more effective, [increase] their confidence, and

[encourage] them to be more open to and actively engaged in improvement and change" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 114).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a specific collaborative template that has been popular in North American schools for the past thirty years. PLCs are "communities characterized by shared norms and values, a focus on student learning, social trust, deprivatization of practice, collective responsibility, and collaboration" (Snyder, 2017, p. 2). These communities are a "paradigm shift away from traditional teacher development monitored by external experts to lifelong professional learning in the workplace where teachers share their expertise within a community" (Tam, 2015, p. 22).

Benefits of Collaboration within Schools

Collaboration within schools has been shown to have a direct effect on teacher well-being, retention, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction (Snyder, 2017, p. 2) and improve teacher performance and student achievement (Conner, 2015, p. 12). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) explain that teacher collaboration "leads to improvement through exploring challenging questions about practice together" and that "teachers who work in professional cultures of collaboration tend to perform better than teachers who work alone" (p. 112). Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found a significant link between teacher collaboration in instructional teams and across domains and student achievement.

Emerging Themes

The four themes that emerged from improvisational theory can also be identified in research on leading collaborative school cultures. Leaders looking to foster collaborative school cultures in their settings must create the conditions for their staff to build trusting relationships with one another (*Connect*), ensure their staff have a clear understanding of the group's goals and guidelines around reaching them (*Define the Rules*), be treated as experts, and offered autonomy

(*Share the Lead*), and build on one another's strengths while learning from challenges (*Play the Game*).

Connect

The need for leaders to establish and maintain trusting environments in which their staff connect to learn with and from one another cannot be overstated, as "build[ing] relationships ... is foundational to creating an environment where people are willing to take risks, work together, and innovate" (Couros, 2015, p. 99). In their research, Hallam et al. (2015) found "trust developed through benevolence, reliability, and openness facilitated team collaboration by increasing communication, sharing, and perceived competence" (p. 208). Hargreaves (2019) corroborates that "people perform better in their work when others take an interest in them and that there is a strong relationship between friendship and output, though it is far from straightforward" (p. 617).

The work of teacher collaboration can be a very vulnerable undertaking and "trust among colleagues is essential in implementing authentic collaboration" (Conner, 2015, p. 15). Teachers in collaborative relationships are called on to share their successes and their challenges, admit what they do not yet know, remain curious, and have the courage to ask for help. "School cultures with high levels of reciprocal trust are conducive to sharing experiences, generating ideas, making choices, taking risks, and accomplishing the important work of improved student-learning outcomes for all children" (Sopko & LaRocco, 2016, p. 73). Hattie (2015) notes a significant effect on student achievement when teachers work together to evaluate their impact (p. 18) and he instructs leaders to "create a trusting environment where staff can debate the effect they have and use the information to devise further innovations" (p. 22).

In their study investigating trust and collaboration within PLCs, Hallam et al. (2015) emphasize the necessity of establishing trust in fostering a willingness to be vulnerable and take

risks (pp. 207-211). Specifically, they determine trust "influences how often teachers share teaching strategies and how open teachers are with student data [and] high trust is needed in order for teachers to deprivatize their teaching practice, which is a centerpiece of highly effective PLCs" (p. 209). When teachers trusted one another, they "felt safe in sharing their students' achievement data and other information that made them feel vulnerable" and felt more comfortable and confident sharing ideas and asking for help from one another (p. 206).

Define the Rules

Educational institutions are guided by vision, values, and shared goals, and for a collaborative culture to thrive, leaders must clearly define the rules of the workplace to their staff as guidelines for them to innovate within. Psychologist and expert on collaborative creativity Keith Sawyer (2017) notes, "the collaborative organization is no anarchy; it's filled with structuring and ordering features" (p. 170). "To implement and sustain effective collaboration, the administrators, teachers, and other service delivery providers need a shared vision and commitment to working together to reach the educational needs of all students" (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015, p. 57). It is imperative for school leaders to help their teams come to a collective understanding about the school's how, what, and why.

Share the Lead

In collaborative school cultures, staff share the lead. According to García Torres (2019), developing collaborative cultures means seeking out opportunities for distributed leadership, which "enables teachers to have more autonomy in their work and greater confidence to coordinate collaborative activities with colleagues" (p. 120). They elaborate, "when teachers are granted greater control over their work conditions through distributed leadership opportunities, they experience greater self-efficacy to collaborate with peers" (p. 120). This point relates back to the

development and maintenance of trust. The autonomy offered to teachers must extend to the collaboration itself, as "how teachers and principals mediate in selecting the purpose, form and focus of collaboration is a key to its functional or attitudinal orientation, and thus its effects on teachers" (Zeng & Day, 2019, p. 395). When teachers are entrusted with decision-making over the collaborative process, they are more likely to take ownership of their professional growth and thrive.

Of course, leaders looking to establish collaborative cultures must adjust their expectations around control. Sawyer (2017) points out, "most people spend too much time planning their own actions and not enough time listening and observing others" (p. 14) and leaders are no exception. Gagnon et al. (2012) add "relinquishing of individual control over the creative process may be difficult to learn for many individuals practicing leadership, and contrasts plainly with traditional models of leadership" (p. 303) and they assert "leadership is not a property of an individual but rather of the process of empathic collaboration and interaction" (p. 307). Counter-intuitive as it may seem, "good managers do not attempt to manage creativity, they manage for creativity, by providing a working environment and culture that allows creativity to flourish" (Goodman & Dingli, 2013, p. 129). Effectively leading collaborative school cultures is about empowering teachers to take the reins.

Play the Game

When school staff connect, define the rules, and share the lead, they can play the game by building on one another's strengths while learning from challenges. A collaborative culture is a well-oiled machine that enables school staff to generate innovative ideas and take efficient action. In describing the characteristics of effective education networks, Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) remark:

> The most effective networks engage participants in a developmental kind of doing, that is, in tasks that change their ways of knowing and acting as these are performed. They learn incrementally as they try out doing things differently, learn from failures and get better over time. (p. 14)

Similarly, Hattie (2015) notes that:

> Collaboration is based on cooperativeness, learning from errors, seeking feedback about progress and enjoying venturing into the 'pit of not knowing' together with expert help that provides safety nets and, ultimately, ways out of the pit (p. 27).

Two characteristics of successful collaborative cultures that the research consistently uncovers are: a team's ability to fail forward, and the ability of group members to build on one another's ideas (plussing).

Collaborative cultures that embrace failure as a collective opportunity for growth foster innovation. The challenge is that "because education is a culture of autonomy, teachers may not share their ideas with others for fear of imposing, whereas other teachers will not ask for guidance because they fear being perceived as a weak or struggling teacher" (Conner, 2015, pp. 14-15). Schools can thrive when there is a culture that normalizes risk-taking and failure as a part of the learning process and recognizes that "teachers need multiple opportunities to learn from one another in a safe environment, feeling supported rather than judged" (Conner, 2015, p. 16). A group's strength is dictated by the courage and authenticity that each member brings to the group, as "collaborative cultures are not pressure cookers of guilt and perfectionism, but slow-boiling pots that allow vulnerabilities to be voiced and doubts to be articulated" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 114).

Teaching does not have to be a lonely or competitive profession: “The culture of a collaborative organization is based on flexibility, connection, and conversations” (Sawyer, 2017, p. 156). Hattie (2015) advocates for a model that capitalizes on the strengths of each teacher and calls on educators to “build a profession that allows all to join the successful” (p. 22). Musselman et al. (2018) concur, “principals must be cognizant of the strengths of all their teachers and provide opportunities for those strengths to improve student learning” (p. 5). When the group amplifies the strengths of each of its individuals, everyone benefits.

Eight Proven Practices for Developing and Sustaining Collaborative School Cultures

Nested within the four common themes, I propose eight evidence-informed practices that school-based leaders can utilize to embark on the critical work of developing and sustaining collaborative cultures within their schools (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Trust & Go: 8 Proven Practices for Developing and Sustaining Collaborative School Cultures

Connect

1) Use Time & Space Creatively

Overwhelmingly, the research points toward the need for administrators to use time and resources creatively and purposefully to allow for meaningful collaboration to take place; however, "finding time to develop collaboration, trust, and respect doesn't just happen accidentally or completely spontaneously" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 114). Many researchers agree "administrators need to proactively restructure existing time and resources to intentionally facilitate teamwork" (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015, p. 57). Dedicating time for teamwork may be accomplished through "the non-traditional structuring of teacher time and work [and] schedules [that are] continually revised and tweaked to address the strengths, interests, and needs of the

teachers and their students" (Snyder, 2017, pp. 2-3). Principals must engage in "shrewd scheduling [that] releases the right people to have an opportunity to plan together, [and] can use their own time to cover classes and facilitate this planning" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 118). About use of space, leaders can design and assign spaces to bring collaborators together. Carpenter (2018) notes the importance of "the shared workspace [which] provides [an] opportunity for rich, deep intellectual interactions that form relationships where teachers and administrators approach conflicting values and beliefs in a respectful, mutually caring way" (p. 131). The astute leader will take the time to understand the context of their school community and craft time, space, and resources carefully to ensure that collaborative teams connect and create.

2) Create Opportunities for Meaningful Dialogue

School-based leaders can model and facilitate authentic conversations to build trust and common understanding amongst their teams. Waldron and McLeskey (2010) note "a critical action a principal engages in to support a collaborative culture is to model collaboration in working with other professionals in the school" (p. 67). Leaders can model this type of communication simply "through paying attention, listening, and gestures of genuine care and connection" (Brown, 2018, p. 32). They can model and request "transparent communication among all community members [to foster] trust within and between teams" (Young et al., 2016, p. 78).

Young et al. (2016) further note there is a benefit for staff and students when "school leaders emphasize the use of common language to connect community members [and make time for their staff] to have purposeful conversations with peers" (p. 77). Musselman et al. (2018) suggest a targeted approach to dialogue whereby teachers "engage in [non-evaluative] reflective dialogue with colleagues based on observation of instruction, student work and assessment data while making connections to research-based effective practices" (p. 5).

Define the Rules

3) Articulate Vision, Values, & Goals

Collaborative cultures thrive when they are united around shared vision, values, and goals. Importantly, "the greatest growth occurs when faculties share not only procedural norms, but also common values" (Young et al., 2016, p. 77). Leaders can play "a key role in a collaborative culture by ensuring that goals are explicit and continue to be clear to all as decision making occurs and that expectations for school improvement and student outcomes are high" (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010, p. 67). Collective understanding allows for clarity and consistency within collaborative teams, as "keeping their actions rooted in a common vision allows [teams] to work together toward the desired goal" (Young et al., 2016, p. 77). Zeng and Day (2019) point out "it is not so much how the curriculum of collaboration is formally 'classified' that counts when examining its effects on teachers, but how its purposes, forms and activities are 'framed,' enacted and mediated within the school" (p. 394). Collaborative cultures begin to take shape when teachers unite around a common vision, values, and goals.

4) Integrate Evidence-Informed Pedagogical Practices

It is critical school leaders prioritize the integration of evidence-informed pedagogical practices into the work of their collaborative teams, given the limited time and resources educators must meet students' learning needs. Ketterlin-Geller et al. (2015) concur "the organizational behaviors and structures administrators implement should be with the intent of supporting [the] academic achievement of all students" (p. 52). They go on to outline several strategies, including "providing access to current research, engaging in group discussions about evidence-based practices, ...structuring differentiated professional development to meet individual teachers' needs… [and] schedul[ing] time for teachers to observe each other as well as directly facilitat[ing]

discussions on the importance of monitoring implementation of instructional practices on student achievement" (pp. 52-53). The task of administrators is to provide ease of access to current research on effective pedagogy and create an environment conducive to collaborative learning.

Share the Lead

5) Co-create Norms

Leaders can set their staff up for success by working alongside them to co-create norms for how the team will function, so that "everyone can be heard in a professional manner and conversations remain focused on the issues" (Young et al., 2016, p. 77). Norms might include prioritizing cooperation over competition (Gonzalez-Mulé, 2014, p. 989), clarifying methods and frequency of communication, and establishing processes for working through conflict. Regardless of the norms chosen, when they address how and when to support one another, "individuals are likely to help team members when the norm of the group dictates that the behavior is appropriate" (Gonzalez-Mulé, 2014, p. 990). Another benefit of co-creating norms is it allows the group to focus on *calling people in* to the agreements rather than *calling people out* on their behaviour when there are slip-ups.

6) Provide Shared Leadership

Collaborative cultures flourish when school-based leaders distribute leadership throughout their teaching teams. In fact, when Hattie updated his meta-analysis on the effect sizes of varied influences on student learning in 2018, the highest on his list by far was collective efficacy, which is "the collective belief of teachers in their ability to positively affect students" ("Hattie effect size list—256 Influences Related to Achievement", 2021). Waldron and McLeskey (2010) contend that "distributed leadership is perhaps the most significant action a principal can take to help develop and support a collaborative culture in a school" (p. 66). Musselman et al. (2018) stress "principals

need to empower their staff with shared leadership, decision-making authority, and promote reflection and collaborative investigation" (p. 7). Hallam et al. (2015) advise that principals "emphasize trust by being open and inclusive when forming teams" (p. 210), "[trust] teachers' professional judgment to set their team goals, act, and influence team formation" (p. 208), and create "organizational conditions in which teachers can exercise greater discretion in using their professional judgment to respond to student needs" (p. 205). In their study on the effects of shared workspace on PLCs, Carpenter (2018) found:

> The cohesion of the PLC team was greatly dictated by the amount of parity, collective collaborative inquiry, and shared decision making that occurred … Participating schools and teachers that shared leadership and decision making expressed less anxiety about student achievement scores ... [and] worked collaboratively on shared leadership and decision making for teaching and learning innovations that enriched student learning. (p. 133-134)

Leaders are cautioned to "avoid top-down micromanagement" (Hallam et al., 2015, p. 210) and "fear-mongering and force" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 119), and to err on the side of "fluid leadership roles, with authority determined by practical knowledge and expertise that are relevant at a particular moment" (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016, p. 15). Further, Hallam et al. (2015) recommend "involving the teachers in forming teams and allowing collaborative teams appropriate autonomy, allow[ing] the team members to make decisions together, follow through on assignments, and experience positive results" (p. 205). When leaders ensure teachers have a say over their time, tasks, and processes, they are setting their staff up for successful collaboration.

Play the Game

7) Amplify Strengths

In the context of collaborative school cultures, leaders must amplify strengths of each of their team members. This is related to the first rule of improvisation, *Yes, And.* Sawyer (2017) notes, "group flow flourishes when people … Listen closely to what's being said; accept it fully; and then extend and build on it" (p. 54). To identify strengths within their team to amplify, "administrators can conduct a staff survey (a needs assessment) to help identify teachers' knowledge and practices" (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015, p. 52 & 53). Leaders must also recognize and consider creative ideas that emerge and "encourage the pursuit of those that contribute to the school's mission" (Young et al., 2016, p. 78). Alongside their teams, leaders can "use procedures that select good improvisations and then spread them throughout the organization (Sawyer, 2017, p. 171).

8) Fail Forward

When leaders foster a culture of failing forward, they support collaboration in their schools. "Education leaders must recognize that schools are places of growth and change, and then inspire faculty members to grow and change together" (Young et al., 2016, p. 77). This means they do not just expect mistakes to happen; they accept them, encourage them, and even celebrate them as a part of the collective learning experience. After all, "the twin sibling of innovation is failure. There's no creativity without failure, and there's no group flow without the risk of failure" (Sawyer, 2017, p. 55). Of course, what is really being discussed here is putting the trust that has been established to the test. Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) unpack the relationship between trust and risk-taking in collaborative cultures:

> Trust is… a fundamental precondition for learning and growth. Bringing the guard down to acknowledge what we do not know and being open to learn in public represents a radical departure from the stance of certainty and ambiguity teachers and system leaders have historically represented. (p. 13)

Another essential consideration within this theme is the notion of "encouraging dissent." As Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) explain:

> In collaborative cultures, failure and uncertainty are not protected and defended, but instead are shared and discussed with a view to gaining help and support... disagreement is more frequent in schools with collaborative cultures because purposes, values, and their relationship to practice are always up for discussion. (p. 113)

There is a key distinction to be made between attacking people and disagreeing with their ideas. Members of effective collaborative teams carefully walk this line by maintaining trusting and empathetic relationships while having the courage to disagree when they feel speaking up is in the best interest of the group. Bolstered by trusting relationships, and with an eye on the shared vision, values, and goals of the organization, "schools with collaborative cultures actively attack incoherence as they focus on established goals and use resources effectively and efficiently" (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010, p. 68). Ultimately, the goal of the collaborative team is "to treat every activity as a rehearsal for next time" (Sawyer, 2017, pp. 55-56).

Discussion

Discussion of Findings

This review examined improvisational theory and research around leading collaboration within schools to uncover practices to support educational leaders. Ultimately, a study of the literature uncovered two seemingly simple ideas: *Trust* and *Go*. Leaders can create the conditions

for their staff to trust in themselves, one another, and their leadership team so they can support one another to be their best possible selves. Teachers can create those same conditions to help their students thrive.

For *Trust* to be established in improvisation, the performers build relationships through listening, agree to prioritize the needs of the group, and ensure they understand and agree to the rules of the game. Similarly, trust is built in school communities when staff build relationships through listening and co-creating norms, are empowered with shared leadership, and understand and agree to a shared vision, values, and goals. “Constructing a positive, trusting, and collaborative climate can only provide more engaging, encouraging, and optimistic opportunities for all stakeholders” (Conner, 2015, p. 22).

The *Go* is about playing the game. In improvisation, that means building on one another’s ideas, giving, taking, and sharing focus, playing within the boundaries, and finding opportunity in failure. In the context of a school culture, playing the game means amplifying one another’s ideas and strengths and recasting mistakes as opportunities to learn.

Implications for Policy & Practice

School divisions may look to the findings of this research to inform their decision-making around resource development for supporting PLCs and professional development for school leaders. For example, they may host a principals’ community of practice focused on developing and refining collaborative cultures within division schools or create a reflection guide to help leaders identify strengths and areas of need. Division or school-based professional learning may also be designed using improvisation exercises that can be related back to each of the identified practices.

School leaders can utilize the practices uncovered through this integrative literature review as a unified and cohesive framework for supporting their staff. Whether leaders utilize a professional learning community model or another collaborative structure, their school communities will benefit when they: *Use Time & Space Creatively; Create Opportunities for Meaningful Dialogue; Articulate Vision, Values, & Goals; Integrate Evidence-Informed Pedagogical Practices; Co-create Norms; Provide Shared Leadership*; *Amplify Strengths; and Fail Forward.*

Limitations & Recommendations for Future Research

It is critical to acknowledge the selected research comes from WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) culture. With that in mind, this review is written by a privileged researcher and for a privileged audience. While the findings may be accurate for and relevant to some and may indeed be empowering to some individuals who are routinely disempowered, they are most certainly not accurate for and relevant to all.

This review is just the tip of the iceberg. Clearly, there are strong links to be made between improvisation and leading collaborative school environments. The options for future research are vast. Researchers may extend this review's findings by orchestrating discussion groups with school leaders to uncover rich examples of the identified practices. Researchers may build on Skalican's (2018) work and examine the applicability of improv training in establishing trust within collaborative teams or professional learning communities. After all, "with its strong focus on creativity and imagination, improv training could be an engine to feed [the] imagination and creative ideas in organizations" (Skalican, 2018, p. 135). Researchers may examine the effects of improvisation on organizational creativity (Nisula & Aino, 2017, p. 485). Future researchers may even relate newer leadership theories to improvisational skills (Gagnon, 2012, p. 300).

Conclusion

Successful collaborative teams "encourage, support, and respect one another" (Conner, 2015, p. 14), and school leaders have a responsibility to establish and maintain a trusting environment in which collaborative creativity can flourish. This research offers school leaders a menu of proven practices that will result in their staff feeling safe, included, valued, and willing to be vulnerable and take risks together to move student learning forward. Undoubtedly, "art can be a valuable tool for improving the understanding and practice of leadership" (Gagnon, 2012, p. 320). Improvisers possess valuable skills and knowledge that can support school leaders in their endeavour to build effective collaborative teams. Amy Poehler (2014) wisely points out "to be a good improviser you have to listen and say yes and support your partner and be specific and honest and find a game within the scene you can both play" (p. 110), and the same can be said of a good educational collaborator. Members of collaborative cultures trust one another and set each other up for success. They share courageously, build on one another's ideas, and embrace curiosity and risk-taking in the service of collective growth. Improvisational theatre offers a lens through which to approach the work of developing collaborative cultures. The goal of this review was to examine the wisdom of educational research from the vantage point of improvisational theatre to uncover practices for school-based leaders to foster collaborative cultures within their schools. It is my sincere hope that through this integrative literature review, a new framework has emerged that may empower school leaders and teachers looking to develop collaborative cultures that *Trust* and *Go.*

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