Distrust, Relationality and Equity: A Response to Lacourt Suárez's Trust, Learning and Social Growth Continuum

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Abstract

My encounter with Lacourt Suárez's (2026) *Positive Leadership and its Impact on Improving the Climate in Chilean Schools. A Comparison between Teachers and School Leaders* (Lacourt Suárez, 2026), compelled me to raise considerations for the role of trust in leadership and implications for effective teaching, successful students, and the achievement of social democratic goals. I wondered about how this equation manifests in contexts characterized by power differentials and intergenerational distrust. By reframing from a linear cause-and-effect to a cycle of negotiating trust and its implications for effectiveness, learning, and equity, we can not only recognize and encounter distrust but also embrace it in dissonance. Considering distrust as an attribute of calibrating relationships informed by social conditions that lie beneath the veneer of the certainty of trust, school leaders can discover the liberating discourse that results from interrogating trust and embracing the complexity and conditions that instigate distrust. Accepting these conditions as norms in building relationships based on authenticity has the potential to disrupt lingering power relationships in schools and society.

Keywords: Trust, school leadership, relationality, equity.

Opportunity and Encounter

In the spring of 2025, I was invited to review a manuscript submitted to the Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy titled *Positive Leadership and Its Impact on Improving the Climate in Chilean Schools. A Comparison between Teachers and School Leaders* (Lacourt Suárez, 2026). The manuscript presented a Chilean research project on the encounters of climates of trust between teachers and school leaders, and the impact of positive leadership on school climate. As I formulated my assessment of the manuscript, I considered my encounter with the assumptions and findings, and I was fortunate to have the provocation of the review to shake loose some of my own ideas about leadership, trust, and equity. What follows is an exploration of my reflections that emerged in response to the manuscript and as an extension of my learning, as an uninvited companion article.

My musings follow a stream of consciousness that considers the role of the broader social context as impediments to or opportunities for relationships and trust in schools. Lacourt Suárez's (2026) study occurred in a Chilean schools' context, while my area of focus is Canadian Indigenous education. Just as each context helps to illuminate understandings of relationships and trust, our sense-making is also a product of Western theoretical and professional narratives of leadership and schools, because that is predominant and accessible. My motivation to respond was largely because I felt compelled to as a consumer and critic of Western discourse and how it applies in professional and research contexts. I endeavoured to expose some *between-the-lines* understandings and interpretations in both demonstrating my appreciation for the articulation of the lessons learned and the implications for research and practice that emerged in our virtual exchange. My unsolicited contribution, then, was to instigate a cross-contextual dialogue with Lacourt Suárez as a sense-making exercise that I believe adds value to their work through

my encounter with and response to it.

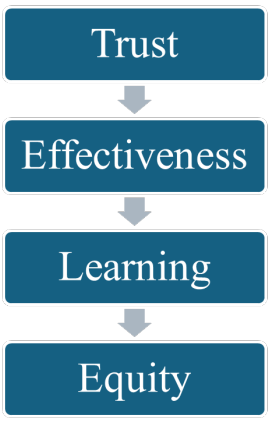
Mostly, what follows is an invitation to think past the security of trust and explore dissonance and distrust as meaningful products of an interrogation of the contributions of positive leadership (Lim, 2019) to trust and social change. The continuum that Lacourt Suárez (2026) illustrated establishes a throughline from trust to teacher performance, teacher performance to student learning, and student learning to social change. This progression may be a part of the promise of public education, but it is, in my opinion, too convenient as a motivator and one that would benefit from a stir. I wished to unsettle that progression, if only to sharpen thinking about its assumptions and invite wonder about the possibilities growing outside of those assumptions as we consider opportunities to improve upon the qualities and climates that implicate schools in social change.

Still, there's some audacity in my desire to critique "…a study that analyzed the opinion that teachers and principals have about the nature of relationships and the presence (or absence) of relational trust and positive leadership…" (Lacourt Suárez, 2026, p. 123) as these associations are well established (Bird et al., 2009; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). It was the claim that "the development of positive institutional climates where respect and relational trust is a key factor for the promotion of educational improvement strategies aligns with the advancement of student learning, coexistence, democracy and equity" (Lacourt Suárez, 2026, p. 123) that opened wide a door to engaging a professional, if not public, discussion of the resilience of that continuum. This is a continuum that I believe in, and have witnessed, but as I have come to better understand the potential of leadership as an affordance or constraint to equity, there are some assumptions that need to be troubled to be better understood and strengthened to improve the value proposition of leadership and ensure its resilience to school and social climates often characterized by distrust and inequity.

As Lacourt Suárez (2026) claims, the centrality of school leadership in this equation looms large, but the conclusion of the study that "…relational trust impacts on the work climate, emotional well-being, teamwork and the achievement of institutional goals, as well as on educational outcomes" (Lacourt Suárez, 2026, p. 123) yields too much to trust *held in trust* by school leaders, and in fact reinforces a controlling stake in improvement and equity that I do not believe we should yield to school leaders. For school leaders to genuinely build trusting climates, they must trust that a social context existed prior to their arrival and exists independently of them, and be vulnerable to their role within it. How, then, do minority and marginalized teachers and school leaders build trusting relationships within school contexts characterized by historic and intergenerational distrust while re-engineering schools for effectiveness, learning, and equity? To prove the validity of Lacourt Suárez's (2026) thesis, then, it must be considered from outside of the continuum.

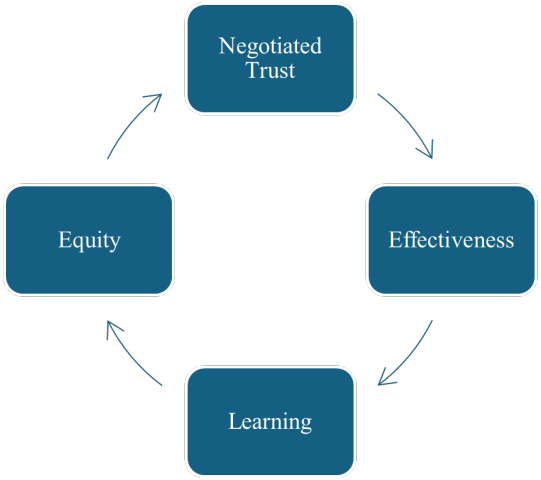
Specifically, the part of the continuum that requires reconsideration and reconceptualization is the hinge of trust. Although there are many contributions of this research to positive leadership and its role in precipitating effective schools and the achievement of social goals, the trust component of the equation is worth focusing on, as distrust is a common feature in power relationships. Enduring power relationships warrant efforts to draw improvement discourse away from the forces that perpetuate inequity. This malcontent and dissent need to be understood and harnessed so that the continuum can also apply, where the first assumption is that the very systems that purport to steward trust often sustain distrust. Simply, trust is not the foundation of the continuum, but a product of it. The following diagrams illustrate my thesis and predict the argument to follow.

Figure 1



The Trust, Effectiveness, Learning, and Equity Continuum
Note: Figure 1 illustrates the contributions of trusting collegial climates to effective teaching, enhanced student learning, and social equity implied by Lacourt Suárez (2026).

Figure 2



The Negotiated Trust, Effectiveness, Learning, and Equity Cycle
Note: Figure 2 illustrates my adaptation of the continuum illustrated in figure 1 where a continually negotiated trust contributes to effective teaching, enhanced students learning, and social equity.

Challenging Assumptions

Figure 1 illustrates a continuum that suggests that the school leader is the purveyor of trust so that they are assumed to have the authority to recognize, embody, and instill it. While we understand and accept that trust enhances relationships, relationships foster collaboration, and collaboration instigates a coordinated and effective response to the needs of students, there is much more that inheres in our embrace of trust that carries implications for relationships to the powerful centre and the presence and distribution of power. When we accept distrust as an effect and permanent characteristic of power relationships, then we can anticipate and work with it as a feature of the rebalancing of power relationships and liberation rather than a systemic flaw to be corrected. When trust is assumed as a given, the social contract is fixed. How, then, do we recognize the presence and value of distrust as dissonance and as a valid and valued aspect of school leadership? Like resistance leadership (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007), learning from the loss

and reclamation of trust recognizes that sometimes leaders need to yield the desire to broker trust to learn from its presence and absence.

Further, if the broker of trust is positive leadership, then we must revisit the attributes of positive leadership and understand that it is also founded on "…active listening, the development of multi-level relational trust in schools and democratic decision-making" (Lacourt Suarez, 2025, p. 123). These attributes cannot be actualized without a recognition of malcontent by loss of power that some communities engage in, and liberative teachers and leaders recognize and embrace. When revolutions move from malcontent to whispers to resistance, then distrust can be a powerful tool to harness its liberative value.

Growing in Dissent

Lacourt Suárez's (2026) claim that "…resilience and relational trust are key professional competencies in … schools, especially in complex and disadvantaged contexts" (Lacourt Suárez, 2026, p. 123) is aspirational and observationally true, and it reinforces the pen-as-sword attribute of liberative learning. I attest that schools commonly embrace liberative learning but aspire to do so without the messiness of dissonance, as schools do not handle dissent well. Essentially, the value proposition of democratic schools is that *we can help you to learn so that you can liberate, and all the best as you attempt to level the playing field of equity and learning.* What is missing is recognition that the master's house will not be dismantled with the master's tools (Audre Lorde in Strega, 2005). Still, Lacourt Suárez (2026) affirms the revolutionary intent of social democratic education with the notion that:

> Positive leadership increases the effectiveness in the development and learning of students, so school leaders should enhance emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996) and professional interrelationships (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), which promote dynamic school environments in which all members of the educational community can thrive" [and] it is therefore a good starting point to create solid relationships of trust with and among teachers (p. 125)

There are two competing truths in these statements, though: 1) that through trust, school leaders build learning environments conducive to thriving, and 2) that trust is a currency that leaders can introduce into the system. The dynamism of the relationship between sowing trust and cultivating trust is a space of dissent worth considering.

Embracing Distrust

Encountering Lacourt Suárez's (2026) manuscript illuminated a pathway that I had been contemplating for some time. In part, my exploration of the space between trust and distrust emerged from my thinking about trickster logic and liminal spaces (Bassil-Morozow, 2015; Szakolczai, 2022). For the purposes of this argument, there is no need to fully unpack that train of thought, but just enough to set the stage for this discourse. Learning in liminality and with the instructional falter of trickster's perpetual shortcomings fosters a reflective gaze that keeps one humble and open to one's own power to solve problems through trial and error. Learning in self-doubt can be a powerful tool if it can be accepted as liberating. Trust in this way is not only outward-facing in terms of a state that we achieve with others, but also inward-facing as a quality that we recognize in ourselves. Distrust is akin to liminality in the simple assessment that if we are unsure about ourselves, we open ourselves to the infinite possibilities revealed in liminal spaces.

In considering trust and distrust, I was intrigued by Lu et al.'s (2021) notion of the effects of an agentic response to distrust by a supervisor. They described being *ability-distrusted*, meaning that a leader questions a subordinate's competence and invokes the Chinese concept of *Jijiangfa*, which suggests that a supervisor's distrust might encourage an employee to improve themselves (Lu et al., 2021). The nature of being ability-distrusted is that, according to Lu et al. (2021), employees are presented with two paths: one to embrace efforts to improve, and the other not to. They claim that when a supervisor's competence is perceived to be high, being ability-distrusted may cause decreased effort and performance on the part of the employee, given that they trust the assessment of their poor skills or performance by an authoritative figure. On the contrary, when a supervisor's competence is perceived to be low, being ability-distrusted can cause employees to improve their effort and performance to prove the supervisor wrong.

These understandings, according to Lu et al. (2021), are a product of psychological reactance theory that suggests that if external negative information threatens one's positive self-image, it motivates them to restore their self-image. In this way, they argue, self-assessment and self-enhancement work together, and the employee still has agency to either respond by withholding effort and performance or enhancing effort and performance.

Underpinning their analysis, informed by psychological reactance theory, Lu et al. (2021) identified that because individuals desire freedom, threats against their freedom motivate them to restore it. If professional agency is free, then the effects on that freedom are either an assessment of competence or incompetence. Of course, we aspire to employees not being cast into a dichotomy as self-assessment and self-enhancement work together (Lu et al., 2021), balancing tendencies to be limited or liberated by critique. Intrigued by their findings, I consider the school leader who claims to add value by facilitating staff competence in a given area without also holding that same competence. This is especially true with instructional leadership, where leaders may lack the specific expertise to engage as a peer with their staff, while claiming that their contribution is as a convener of experts. The risk is that an invitation to performance improvement is founded on blind trust, where the leader can only hope to leverage self-directed improvement on the part of the teacher in one direction that is not reciprocated by the leader. When a leader shares competence, though, relationality is introduced through the shared currency of effectiveness.

Like the liminality of trickster logic (Szakolczai, 2022), learning and self-doubt are calibrated against an externally imposed set of expectations and mediated through an internal logic of wrestling with expectations and aptitude, and an internal interrogation of how one mediates their sense of self and society based on internal and external points of reference. As an individual wrestles with their self-imposed doubts and confidences, they grow by embracing dissonance that causes them to reach for inner competencies. As they come to know the source of their feelings of inadequacy, either self- or externally imposed, they engage with a corresponding pathway to enhancement. How this relates to trust is that the more aware one is of whether their inadequacies are indicative of a lack of competencies or a lack of conforming to expected competencies, they will either respond by enhancing performance based on external expectations or internal expectations. This means that trust is not the pinnacle of success in creating the conditions for enhanced performance, as it may be distrust of the conditions that give rise to perceptions of lack of competence that reveal potential and fuel motivation for improvement. A specific example is that Indigenous teachers might rely on patterns of deference and non-interference that are consistent with their cultural sensibilities but might be perceived as weakness or a lack of control in a classroom context. In this way, distrust is a close friend of the marginalized as an ally in making sense of performance measured against an externally imposed expectation.

I was reminded of Schul et al.'s (2008) claim that "…unlike people who trust, those who distrust attempt to ascertain the other's attempts at deception by searching for signs that the other's behaviour is departing from what is routine in the situation" (p. 1294). They reported that within a context of trust, there is a tendency to validate information, while in a context of distrust, individuals will search for less obvious interpretations as the truth may be concealed (Schul et al., 2008). In a state of distrust, one considers whether the typical "schema" used to interpret a situation in a state of trust needs to be adjusted to account for the potential of deception (Schul et al., 2008). In this way, Schul et al. (2008) suggest that distrust opens up the potential of non-routine responses. They use the example of a nice paint job on a car and how, within a context of trust, it is a valued attribute, but in a context of distrust, it may be perceived as covering something up.

Their research revealed that those who trust draw on routine rules of inference, whereas those who distrust are better able to thrive in unexpected or non-routine environments (Schul et al., 2008). In this way, distrust puts one on guard against being misled but also opens receptors that cause one to act with intent rather than relying solely on the validation of trust. I see promise in engaging people between trust and distrust, so that they do not default to trusted schema and automatic responses, but exercise agency to act in a way that is consistent with what their agency suggests. As in the example of instructional leadership, trusting that the leader is charting an authentic course works alongside trusting that the agentic teacher also adds value to predicting and actualizing a way forward. To loop back to considerations for minority and marginalized teachers and leaders within school systems, the intergenerational lack of trust that fosters attitudes of distrust constitutes a cultural characteristic, so that questioning the accepted

schema is not just a residual effect of marginalization, but a highly developed acuity that helps to avoid marginalizing pitfalls while endorsing agency that if something does not seem right, it probably is not. When a leader understands the cumulative effects of exclusion and marginalization that invite distrust, they are better able to mediate trusting relationships, but not by their schema alone.

Engaging in the exploration of distrust as well as trust accepts that "in the absence of trust 'people are increasingly unwilling to take risks, demand greater protections against the possibility of betrayal, and increasingly insist on costly sanctioning mechanisms to defend their interests'" (Tyler & Kramer, 1996, pp.3-4 in Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998, p. 334), which considers the confidence and vulnerability of the agent within the context of trust. In this way, trust travels with vulnerability, and as Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) suggested, "where there is no vulnerability there is no need to trust" (p. 337). They illustrate that provisional trust assumes that the other wants to maintain the relationship and that a breach of trust would impede the potential for the relationship. They describe this as deterrence-based trust while knowledge-based trust emerges "as actors get to know one another and come to feel able to predict how the other is likely to behave in [a] given situation" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998, p. 337). Ultimately, though, identity-based trust emerges "…when there is complete empathy with the other party's desires and intentions" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998, p. 337). Their research illustrates how trust is socially situated and built on an optimistic premise, defaulting to a belief in others without a compelling reason to disbelieve.

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (1998) research demonstrated that the behaviour of the school leader contributes to the development of trusting relationships; however, the currency of trust is not necessarily a proxy for trusting relationships among colleagues. This finding highlights the difficulty in building trust in diverse social contexts, as the principal cannot necessarily represent or repair the trust that is breached or in need of repair that originates elsewhere. If the principal cannot inherently broker trust beyond the transactional relationship between teacher and principal, then they certainly are not in the best position to broker trust on behalf of historically fractured communities. While the principal may prioritize building trust among the various sub-communities that exist within a staff (many of which are characterized by power differentials), these relationships require boundary crossing by the principal. Expecting responsibility for repairing trust to reside with the principal is incomplete. In a context where there is a risk of distrust associated with power relationships, the leader's role in re-establishing trust is fragile. Building trust cannot only be perceived as a leadership characteristic but must be considered within the context of the school culture.

Not having to harness (constrain) trust to perpetuate it is illustrated in Massari et al.'s (2019) illumination of the attributes of collective intelligence (the wisdom of the crowd) that accrues from the turbulence of social flux and the achievement of trust as a shared social goal. They argue that it is through social relationships that the collective performs better than the individual. They contrast bottom-up processes that aim to enhance collaboration among individuals through mediating qualities (social sensitivity) with top-down processes that aim to coordinate social relationships through structural considerations, such as group norms (Massari et al., 2019). Through collective intelligence, they argue there is an optimal level of consensus that avoids the pitfalls of a group acting as individual agents and not benefitting from the collective, while maintaining an environment conducive to the benefit of minority opinions (Massari et al., 2019). We might commonly refer to this phenomenon as groupthink, which describes the very edge of consensus before conformity limits ingenuity. The key to their position is that while consensus is a good thing, the chafing of dissent can also produce pearls of performance. Consider my through-line example of disunity within a staff that is nested within a larger social context impeding trust, and if that staff cannot wrestle with or contribute to the resolution of distrust among people, especially resulting from historical power relationships. If the disunity of creative dissent can avoid creating fractures among staff, it may then contribute to small and large social resolutions that can only be wrestled with among people as they mediate trust and distrust. A salient example in the Canadian context is reconciliation discourse among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. There may exist a priority for reconciliation education, but it also must be embraced among the people who comprise the school community. While the principal may create the conditions for this discourse, the social wrangling of resolving power differentials can only ever be a democratic achievement rather than an autocratic pronouncement.

Jones (2019) explored affective feedback loops and their role in "…creating and sustaining trust and distrust" (p. 955). They claimed that while emotions like contempt displace trust, emotions like empathy

reduce distrust, and that affective looping affects how one interprets the motives of another, therefore justifying trust or distrust (Jones, 2019). As such, "affective looping occurs when a prior emotional state provides grounds for its own continuance, or when it provides grounds for another different but allied emotional state which in turn provides grounds for the original emotional state, which further reinforces the allied emotional state, and so on, in a self-supporting loop, a loop that tends to not only sustain but also to magnify both emotional states" (Jones, 2019, p. 956). They offer that counting on someone and trusting someone differ in that counting on someone denotes that they will complete what they committed to do, while trusting someone entails a measured yielding of one's agency to the discretionary powers of the other, and a response to vulnerability at their hands (Jones, 2019). Their assessment that distrust results in protective action such as withdrawing and trust reduces the risk of vulnerability means that "trust and distrust are self-confirming because of the way they shape our perception of the evidence available to us: viewed through the affective lens of trust, you will tend to be interpreted as trustworthy; viewed through the lens of distrust, you will tend to be interpreted as untrustworthy" (Jones, 2019, p. 959).

As trust and distrust reinforce the attitude we hold of the other, fear of the other must be addressed through a realization that the other is more similar than dissimilar to ourselves (Jones, 2019). Social stratification sustained through historical power relationships is a highly entrenched system of misconceptions that ascribes attitudes of a people to an individual. In the context of schools, trust that is seemingly unrelated to broader social conditions may affect the potential of establishing trust if fear lingers based on assumptions of ulterior motives demonstrated through historical fact and consequence. Fear that lingers through social class allegiances need not be resolved at the school level but must be addressed by creating a context of mutual vulnerabilities, where individuals are vulnerable to the class that they occupy, even as they actively resist power differentials. The school leader, then, has a dual responsibility to establish confidence through what they do, and to demonstrate that they can also be trusted through what they do not do in terms of sustaining social divides.

Engaging with the complexity of trust relationships and sense-making in the liminal space between trust and distrust is an invitation to take one's foot off the certainty of the stepping stone of trust and engage with the assumptions and expectations of trust. Essentially, this is an invitation to exercise agency in the space between trust and distrust, to respond to those conditions, and to mediate externally and internally imposed considerations of trust. Questioning the schema (Schul et al., 2008) and trusting a tendency toward nonconformity exposes the vulnerabilities of all parties who are, consciously or unconsciously, either vying for power and authority or escaping it. While this may seem a lot to place on the principal attempting to broker relationships to contextualize a supportive relationship, the extent of trust compartmentalized in the school is limited in effect if it does not also consider broader social conditions that place some above others, distribute power inequitably, and mediate minority perspectives.

It is these considerations that consistently bring me back to the authenticity of relationality that is under-profiled and under-applied within the context of principal-teacher relationships. Relationality and what it implies when articulated through research methodologies or Indigenous community contexts have great relevance for education that indeed aspires to instigate equity and social change. Metaphorically, I imagine transitioning from invitations to trust to invitations to relate, which for me implies a level of reciprocity without the baggage of hidden agendas. It is for this reason that my meagre contribution to Lacourt Suárez (2026) narrative is an invitation to understand, consider, and practice relationality in the very same spaces and for the very same purposes as one might aspire to and nurture trust. One does not replace the other, but they can and should relate to and complement each other.

Relationality

Where trust is often viewed as a destination, relationality is an enduring quality that is a developmental characteristic of trust. Especially among marginalized populations, relationality suggests reciprocity where trust and allegiance are central. Relationality draws the leader into the context of a community rather than remaining superordinate. Amidst lingering power differentials that predict participation and outcomes in education, a leader who commits to relationality has at their disposal myriad opportunities to engage with the real needs of the community and to come to know the capacities and contributions of marginalized staff as brokers of community discourse and aspirations. A commitment to relationality within marginalized communities means that as the leader engages with diverse voices and perspectives, the reciprocal benefits are manifested in tangible reductions of power differentials and enhanced voice

and participation. Through relationality, leaders can engage in moral discourse that challenges the narratives that legitimize differentials in educational participation and outcomes. This includes commitment to and practice of the principles of community development that position the leader in relation to the community and a commitment to recognizing and enhancing community capacities. The exercise of those principles is accessible to all leaders and creates a currency from which to build trust that is contextualized rather than conceptual, and that purposely associates the role of leader with the community rather than with the attributes of leadership. Trust is trust of something, and that something does not require the marginalized to depart from their own interests to mediate trust, but it invites them into a common currency of relationships that bring the leader closer to the community.

Illustrative of the transformative orientation of relational leadership is Bird et al.'s (2013) articulation of perspectives on leadership and accountability among American Indian students, parents, and teachers in New Mexico public schools. They explored leadership within the contexts of decolonization and empowerment and found that as respondents were critical of power imbalances in schools, they valued leadership situated within traditional American Indian values and applied in the pursuit of self-determination. Participants also expressed the value of service and the ability to sustain traditional leadership values and practices. Most importantly, the role of leaders in connecting the purpose of the school to the well-being of the community is an illustration of relationality, where schools not only serve broader social goals but also establish the building blocks to those social goals by flattening hierarchies and positioning the school as a catalyst to equity and participation.

Similarly, Buckmiller's (2015) examination of the contributions of Indigenous leadership to Indigenous student success identified that cultural affiliation with the community enhanced connections with students, parents, and educators, and that leaders leverage that affiliation to model success. Principals viewed themselves as a bridge between the values of the community and the school, and that their community linkages allowed them to uniquely serve communities by addressing issues of sovereignty, self-determination, and decolonization. While schools might teach these qualities, Buckmiller's (2015) conceptualization of culturally affiliated leadership also enacts them as social goals. This is illustrative of not only seeing, holding, or mediating the values of a marginalized community within the context of the school, but also deliberately repositioning the school as a liberative agent.

Henderson et al. (2015) explored how American Indian school leaders reconciled cultural clashes and confronted racism through their identity and relationality, noting that "displaying caring for behaviors in Indigenous communities can be seen in the complex dance of relationality. All interactions, starting with initial greetings and moving to elaborate storytelling, are designed to connect individuals in a relationship" (p. 221). Their focus on the primacy of relationality in Indigenous communities illustrated that the identity of Indigenous school leaders contributed to their ability to support communities to resist the diminishing effects of Western schooling. Relationality also enabled the school leaders to revise their practice to continue to reduce the effects of cultural conflicts, demonstrating that the role of school leader needs not only to be used to intervene to reduce the effects of disparities, but that the role can be shaped to account for mediating equity as a feature of leadership. This is important, considering the complementary roles of the school leader in building trust and dismantling the limiters of trust.

Lowe et al.'s (2019) literature review examined the reciprocal relationship between Australian Aboriginal parents and schools and found that despite policy frameworks targeted at enhancing those relationships, there was little effect on Aboriginal student outcomes or Aboriginal parental support for schools. They identified personal, structural, and epistemic barriers to the establishment of reciprocal relationships, including the effects of racism, expectations of students, and negative impacts on students' self-efficacy and well-being (Lowe et al., 2019, p. 256). This is an illustration that policy expectations of relationship are not sufficient to realize relationships, except with exemplary leaders who practice authentic engagement, shared leadership, and appreciation for community culture as relationality is a personal commitment and professional practice that needs to be better understood to articulate the kinds of things that leaders can be taught, encouraged, or compelled to do that will advance relationality based on a shared commitment to addressing oppressions.

The kinds of leadership that Indigenous communities value and sustain are characterized by respectful relationships as vehicles for recognizing oppressions and furthering the liberative aspirations of the communities. Drawing examples of relationality from Indigenous leadership contexts offers unique insights at the confluence of schools, leadership, and communities, where oppression and liberation are

considerations for the encounter of students with the school, as well as broader goals of developing equity as a democratic principle. While this research does not exclude non-Indigenous leaders, it does prioritize deep understandings and cultural connections that are associated with community membership, placing a greater emphasis on the role and participation of school leaders in fostering student and family engagement and success as a tangible demonstration of trust in the community, and an invitation to trust in the leader. The development of respect and relational trust as a verb is a key factor in the actualization of the continuum of trust, effectiveness, learning, and equity.

Reflections on the Role and Value of International Exchanges

Looping back to Lacourt Suárez's (2026) contributions and inspirations, it is crucial to understand how teachers and principals characterize "…the presence (or absence) of relational trust and positive leadership in … public schools" (p. 123) and the role of respect and relational, trust in promoting educational improvement, enhancing student learning, and flourishing equity as a pillar of democracy. Most crucially, Lacourt Suárez (2026) shone a light on the role of school leaders in facilitating relational trust as a feature of leadership and schools. Although I take some exception with the notion that this is especially relevant in complex and disadvantaged contexts, as a commitment to relationality would suggest that liberation is not only in the purview of the marginalized, Lacourt Suárez (2026) does reinforce an imperative of the role of schools in achieving the kind of social context that we aspire to.

There is nothing in my critique that is contrary to A Lacourt Suárez's (2026) call for "…the formation and implementation of positive leadership practices based on active listening, the development of multi-level relational trust in schools and democratic decision-making" (p. 123). I believe, though, that the leadership practices that will build a resilient and lasting trust in schools that churn the cycle of a reciprocally negotiated trust that facilitates the achievement of equity of participation and outcome in schools are not soft skills but are hard commitments to exposing the culpability of schools in social stratification. Relational leadership needs to create the conditions that allow the oppressive features of schools to come apart at the seams. I suppose that ultimately, revolution presents differently for those revolting and for those suppressing the revolution. What might be viewed as an audacious assessment of the role of schools in eroding equity is really an invitation to fully actualize the potential of schools to do just the opposite. Troubling the simple equation of leadership and trust offers a great opportunity to better understand and apply the principles of relationality in motivating the cycle that ensures that schools continue to be a catalyst for democracy.

Conclusion

Lacourt Suárez's (2026) findings helped to better understand trust relationships as catalysts to professional practice, student learning, and equity. Those who hold the belief that school leaders are important in the continuum from trust to the achievement of social goals will find encouragement in Lacourt Suárez's invitation to enlist school leadership in strengthening these connections. I have experienced work climates that became stronger at the broken places (Cockrum-Murphy, 2010) through coming to terms with the fault lines that lay below the surface of Western education. Should we expect trust to emerge from neutral or critical contexts? As Louis and Murphy (2017) suggested, it is the relationships between adults that are the basis for building positive climates in schools and the classroom to promote better teaching, more authentic and meaningful learning, and better outcomes for students. Let a relationality prevail, then, that is resilient enough to endure the difficult conversations that challenge impediments to equity and celebrate leaders' roles in opening schools to critical discourse that will ensure that a social democratic education remains the most significant catalyst to its sustainability.

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