

**Learning communities and social capital
and the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund:
A descriptive case study**

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Part I: Introduction and background

When study participants were asked to describe the culture of the Memorial Fund, adjectives came quickly and enthusiastically:

“accessible” “radical” “catalytic” “empowering” “intentionally teaching” “grassroots” “respectful” “supportive” “complex” “partnering” “new learning” “uplifting” “loving” “collaborative” “educational” “broad-based” “innovative” “life changing” “team building” “necessary/important” “thought provoking” “open to all thinking” “challenging” “holistic” “process-based” “flexible” “transparent” “inclusive” “proactive”

– and the list goes on. Referred to by more than one person as “a family,” the William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund is indeed a family foundation based in New Haven, Connecticut which has as its mission “to improve the effectiveness of education in fostering both personal development and leadership.” With an annual operating expense budget of approximately \$6 million, it is a relatively small foundation, and care has been taken by its trustees and Executive Director to maintain a clear and fairly narrow focus on early childhood and K-12 education since 1993. This focus has resulted in a positive reputation among education specialists, policymakers, and community members around the state of Connecticut. It has also aided in the development of a coherent organizational culture that is characterized not only by the adjectives above but by the development of learning communities and social capital. This case study aims to describe the ways in which the Memorial Fund acts as and supports various forms of learning communities and grows social capital.

The case study will explore the growth of social capital and learning communities in consideration of the myriad ways the Memorial Fund enacts and embodies its core beliefs. In particular, the following four beliefs, listed on the Memorial Fund’s website, will be addressed in the ensuing pages:

- Families, schools and communities are partners in the rearing and education of children.
- The best practices in education and child development result from encouraging and listening to all voices of the community and sharing information as widely as possible.
- Those working in education and in communities are most effective when all constituencies work together to develop leadership, to set goals, to advocate for policy changes, and to evaluate continuously the effectiveness of current programs.
- Every institution educating or working with children needs to be a learning organization, where opportunities abound among all education stakeholders, including children, for intellectual development, information sharing and teamwork (www.wcgmf.org).

With a variety of initiatives and activities, the Memorial Fund strives to achieve its mission and stay true to the core beliefs above. As one staff member stated, “From the very first, the strategies encompassed engaging communities and parents, helping schools improve themselves, and policy- what do we need to reduce barriers or provide opportunities for change” (Int1). Another staff member explained that “There are two

sides to the house: communities and policy...[but the] division is not quite as clear as it sounds...we do a lot of the work in tandem” (Int5). This connection between community involvement and change-making creates opportunities for growing social capital systemically that might not be present if the Memorial Fund focused solely on one aspect or the other. It is precisely this connection that provides added value to the Memorial Fund’s work, because social capital enables social change. To explain this further, the two guiding concepts around which this case study is framed, “learning communities” and “social capital,” are clarified below and are explored and elaborated upon in Part II (the presentation and interpretation of research findings).

Learning communities

“Being a Graustein grantee is akin to being adopted....There are opportunities for learning and problem-solving” (Int2).

Foundations such as the Memorial Fund often function as interconnected systems of institutions and/or people-groups, because their main purpose is to provide assistance for activities by those institutions and groups in the interest of a broad common vision. While activities may differ among groups, all are connected by this common vision. Systems theory provides a perspective on the functioning of organizational environments and members with an emphasis on this “interconnectedness” (also spoken of as networks). A systems theory approach to organizational analysis involves acknowledging the “multiplicity and complexity of factors” that affect individuals and groups within organizations over time (Evans, 1996). Systems thinkers look for patterns of behavior and change in an organization, rather than isolated events, in order to understand how and why members work toward achieving their goals (Evans, 1996; Wheatley, 2006). Further, social network analysis emphasizes the importance of relationships and ties between and among actors in an organization in addition to individual behaviors (Granovetter, 2007). Organizations that employ systems thinking by prioritizing communication, collective aspiration, and a continual focus on learning for improvement and effectiveness are considered “learning organizations” (Senge, 1990).

Learning organizations take many forms but are generally marked by the provision of structures through which members engage in “professional dialogue, through seeking out information and evidence, through self-reflection and feedback process” (Mohr & Dichter, 2001, p. 746) as they develop professional practices. Often, members are considered to be change agents and play a large role in creating and recreating their organization (Senge, 1990). Pursuant to the workings of the Memorial Fund and this case study, Burke (2002) suggests that living systems “nest” inside other systems and form “inseparable web[s] of relationships.” Accordingly, the case study examines how learning communities operate within various areas of the Memorial Fund to demonstrate the extent to which communication styles, relationship-building, and governance structures evidence productive learning communities. The central subject of this case study is how Memorial Fund activities can be considered to contribute to learning communities, and how social capital may be amassing symbiotically for Fund participants, either purposely or inadvertently.

Organizational theorists have reported how business managers use cultural factors to bring about change with staff. The work of Senge (1990), Block (1993), and others emphasizes the importance of nurturing and celebrating the work of each individual and of supporting the collective engagement of staff in such activities as vision and mission development, learning from each other, and problem-solving. In the business sector, this way of operating has been labeled *learning organization*. The related term *learning community* is used extensively in the education literature and generally means extending classroom practice to engage students, teachers, and administrators in reciprocal learning (Darling-Hammond (1996). Leithwood and colleagues (1995) define a learning organization as “a group of people pursuing common purposes (individual purposes as well) with a collective commitment to regularly weighing the value of those purposes, modifying them when

that makes sense, and continuously developing more effective and efficient ways of accomplishing those purposes.” For the purposes of this study, the term learning community will be used, as it allows for exploration of whether or not several smaller learning communities are “nested” within the larger organization.

The learning community usually includes several attributes:

- ✓ **Supportive and shared leadership.** Kleine-Kracht (1993) suggested that leaders, along with staff, must be learners: "questioning, investigating, and seeking solutions" (p. 393) for organizational improvement. "[There is] no longer a hierarchy of who knows more than someone else, but rather the need for everyone to contribute" (p. 393). This “post-heroic” leader has the ability to share authority, the ability to facilitate the work of staff, the ability to participate without dominating, and the desire to create an environment where the staff can learn continuously.
- ✓ **Collective creativity.** A learning organization is a place “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, p. 3). Others have called this reflective dialogue or inquiry.
- ✓ **Shared Values and Vision.** Sharing vision is not just agreeing with a good idea; it is sharing particular mental image of what is important to an individual and to an organization. Staff members are encouraged not only to be involved in the process of developing a shared vision, but to use that vision as a guidepost in decision making. Martel (1993) concisely defines the vision of the professional learning community as “a total quality focus” (p. 24).
- ✓ **Supportive Conditions.** Supportive conditions determine *when*, *where*, and *how* the staff regularly come together as a unit to do the learning, decision making, problem solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community. These conditions include physical space, time, and personnel capacity (willingness to accept feedback and work toward improvement, caring and collegial relationships).
- ✓ **Integrative approach.** Peck (1987) suggests that true community does not try to obliterate diversity, but rather works toward an integrity of the whole. Recognizing that any collaborative work will inevitably face conflicts, the integrative approach seeks to balance and reconcile the tension between conflicting interests, needs, and demands.

Social Capital

“Our theory of change depends on involved parents and involved community” (Int1).

Learning communities depend on a nurturing organizational culture. Organizational culture is a dynamic phenomenon that emerges from the interactions, beliefs, routines, and behaviors of members in a given organization. It is a “pattern of shared basic assumptions that [is] learned by a group as it solve[s] its problems of external adaptation and internal integration,” (Schein, 2004, p. 17) and which contributes to the stability and shared experiences of a group.

The Memorial Fund has a distinct organizational culture that allows for the development of learning communities and social capital. It has a fairly complex model depicting its theory of change (www.wcgmf.org), however the quote above highlights one of its central themes: the means to making change is as important as the change itself. This exemplifies the approach that the Memorial Fund takes to including multiple voices, connecting people with each other, and supporting relationship-building in communities and statewide organizations. In addition to its theory of change, one of the Memorial Fund’s goals is to develop leadership “dedicated to improving and advocating for education” (www.wcgmf.org). Noting the importance of advocacy indicates the Memorial Fund’s acknowledgement that social change is needed in order to fully serve young

children. One way to find out if groups – in this case, the Memorial Fund itself as well as the groups it supports – are successfully contributing to social change is to assess the growth of social capital in and by those groups. Social capital generally takes the form of “trust,” “social norms” and “networks of civic engagement” (Putnam, 1993). Putnam contends that social organization, including trust, norms and networks, can facilitate coordinated action, and thereby improve a member’s quality of life or the quality of programs meant to serve the social good.¹ Coleman (1990) considers social capital to be productive, in the sense that it enables people to achieve certain ends that they would not be able to achieve without it (on their own as individuals). Ostrom (1990) further suggests that success with small-scale cooperative endeavors enables people to build on the social capital created there to solve larger problems with larger and more complex institutional arrangements. In this sense, social capital acts as a self-perpetuating and ever-increasing phenomenon. This case study will describe the ways that the Memorial Fund’s organizational culture and structure contribute to social capital-building.

Trust, norms, and networks

Trust, termed by Hirschman (1984) as a “moral resource,” is an asset that increases rather than decreases with use and time. Trust tends to increase when agreements and activities are “embedded” within larger structures of personal relations and social networks (Granovetter, 1985). Structures of personal relations are akin to Putnam’s “*norms of reciprocity*,” as they include organizational and communication norms explicitly established among colleagues and inculcated through socialization and education. They can also include unspoken expectations between neighbors, community members, and/or colleagues. The following norms, which build trust, are in evidence at the Memorial Fund and will be presented in more detail in Part II:

- Collaboration
- Flexibility
- Respect for the community
- Attention to process
- Dialogue
- Reflection
- Relationship-building

Networks signify patterns of communication among actors (within systems) (Considine & Lewis, 2007) and they connect actors in relationships (Knoke, 1990). Generally, the stronger networks are in a society or organization, the more likely that citizens or members will cooperate for mutual benefit. This positive result of social networks emerges because networks foster reciprocity, facilitate communication, increase the cost to defectors, and increase trust and willingness to collaborate (Putnam, 1993). It is helpful to recognize the distinction between “horizontal” networks, those formed between people of equivalent status or power, and “vertical” networks, those formed between people of unequal status of power (Putnam, 1993). Both are necessary to make social change but they influence the change process in different ways, with the former usually increasing breadth of support among constituents, and the latter connecting those with less power (e.g., local community members) to those with more power to make change (e.g., policymakers).² Also important to recognize is the relationship of networks to learning communities (see Figure 1), which might be described as a progression from a) loose interactions among people to b) networks as formalized, trusting relationships based on common interest(s) (which may be temporary or may require third party facilitation) to

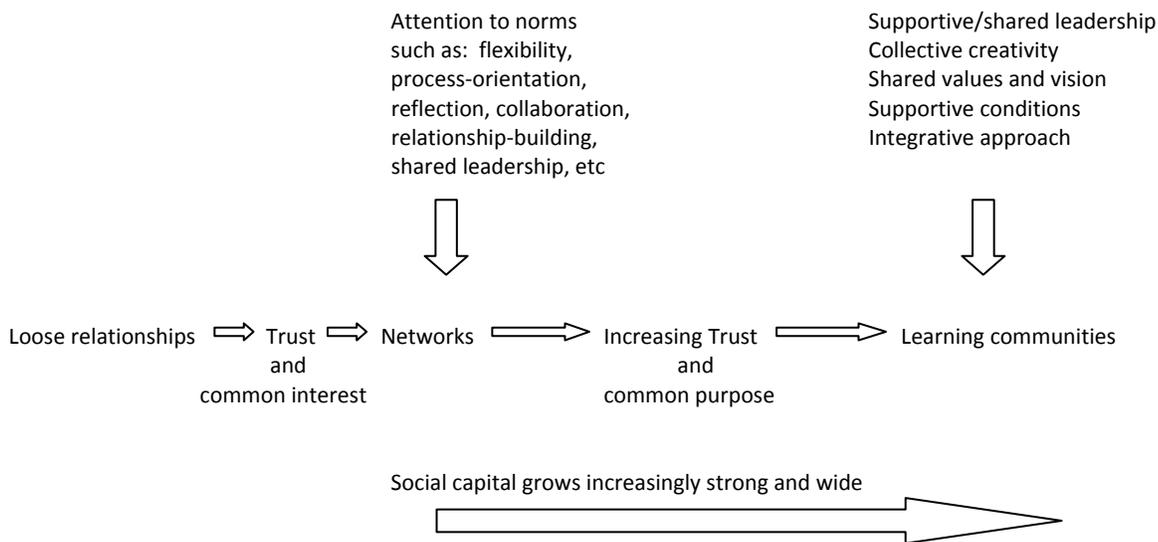
¹ It should be noted that trust, social norms, and networks of civic engagement can be utilized in less positive ways – in the case of promoting the good of some social groups at the expense of others, for example.

² Importantly, network power and benefit can be bi-directional, so although those who hold political power – in the sense of formal authority – by virtue of their positions as legislators are the ones who make formal decisions, they also benefit from the network as their constituents can lend credibility and legitimacy to their efforts and actions.

c) learning communities as formalized, structured networks of people based on common interests, with trust and commitment to working together, using shared/agreed upon norms to meet established goals.

Each organization has a unique culture, which may or may not contribute to the growth of learning communities, and this case study will describe elements of the Memorial Fund’s culture that contribute to the support of both learning communities and social capital.³ Taken together, elements of learning communities contribute to growth in social capital at the Memorial Fund as might be depicted in the following diagram.

Figure 1: Progression of learning community development



The diagram demonstrates that when people who are loosely connected in relationships begin to trust each other, they can become networked with common interests. Such networks – in this case either funded or facilitated by the Memorial Fund – form and employ shared norms such as flexibility and collaboration, and over time they build more trust and establish common purposes. If attention is then also paid to elements such as shared leadership, collective creativity, and shared values and vision, etc., those networks can transform into learning communities. As trust, norms, and networks continue to develop, social capital grows stronger (i.e., has more depth/becomes more entrenched) and wider (i.e., involves more people and groups) and will eventually have the potential to contribute to social change.

Background on the Memorial Fund’s Discovery initiative

The Memorial Fund’s work, with much of its grant investments housed within the Discovery initiative has sought to support the infrastructure for communities – with parents and members from various local agencies, organizations, and businesses -- to come together, plan and advocate for their young children. In addition, the Memorial Fund has supported statewide advocacy organizations believed to be in a position to help amplify

³ This case study will consider the extent to which espoused beliefs about the nature of the work and the Memorial Fund’s purpose permeate organizational activities and are thus embodied in related behaviors of participants. It will not address values or underlying assumptions directly, as these are the subject of another recent report published by the Memorial Fund, “Observing values in action: Stories and lessons from the work of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund,” written by Sally Leiderman of the Center for Assessment and Policy Development.

the voices of communities and focus efforts on statewide change. Finally the creation and continued support of the Connecticut Center for School Change directs foundation resources into supporting instructional improvement in preK-12 grade. Amongst these three levers of change, learning has been on the forefront through capacity building, results based accountability and planning processes and peer sharing. Amidst these opportunities a variety of potential learning communities were identified for the exploration of this case study. These included the Superintendents Network of the Connecticut Center for School Change, the community collaboratives, represented here through a selection of community collaborative coordinators who participated in Memorial Fund capacity building in 2009, community liaisons, and a subset of a group of parents who were each acknowledged at the annual Stone Soup conference for their contributions to work in their communities.

Methodology

The evidence provided in this case study is based on qualitative data gathered from over 30 participants. Qualitative data were obtained to best understand the learning process experienced by participants as well as to gather examples and opinions on those experiences. Eight individual interviews were conducted, including five with staff members, two with consultants to the Memorial Fund who have facilitated the growth of learning communities, and one with a grantee. Interviews were generally one to two hours in length and were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Five focus group discussions were held with the following groups: liaisons (6 participants), community coordinators (8 participants), superintendents (7 participants), parents (5 participants), and statewide grantee representatives (4 participants). Focus groups were similarly one to two hours long, held at the Memorial Fund office, and were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. In addition, several Memorial Fund documents were reviewed. Broad guiding questions included the following:

- How is the Memorial Fund culture described and understood by its members?
- What types of communication and collaboration occur within nested learning communities and across the organization?
- To what extent is trust among colleagues in evidence within and among Memorial Fund activities?
- What kind of shared norms exist across the Memorial Fund's activities?
- What role do horizontal and vertical networks of association play in achieving Memorial Fund objectives?
- What are the structural supports and barriers to systemic coherence and potential for increased empowerment among Memorial Fund colleagues?

To protect anonymity, interviewees are referred to by a randomly assigned code number (Int1, Int2, etc.) rather than by name. Each focus group was also assigned a code name (FGLIAISONS, FGCOORDINATORS, etc.), and any comments from a particular focus group participant are cited with his or her focus group name rather than an individual name. The data was analyzed by reading through transcripts for themes, and the researcher organized the analysis by collecting and grouping comments related to various themes from across the entire data set. The resulting descriptive themes therefore emerged from the aggregate. It is important to note that quotations and references are not meant to ensure equal representation from each source, but rather are included to exemplify trends in the data in support of the themes. As well, an effort was made to include a range of responses, to demonstrate the diversity of thought and divergence of opinion across the entire data set.

After a draft report was written and disseminated to study participants, two feedback sessions were held, one in-person with Memorial Fund staff and another via conference call with several interviewees and focus group participants. Feedback from these sessions was incorporated into the final report by the researcher.

Part II: Locating Learning Communities

This section presents themes (findings) that emanated from the data. Questions to participants were grouped within the following topics, which derived from the broad guiding questions that sought to elicit information about learning communities and social capital at the Memorial Fund:

- **Organizational culture**, including organizational description, history, procedures, capacity, sustainability
- **Collective action**, including collaboration, participation, problem-solving
- **Governance**, including leadership, decision-making
- **Trust and norms**, including communication, conflict management, social context
- **Networks**, including where they exist, how they function
- **Learning gains**, including personal learning opportunities, group learning, encouragement of learning

As a result, the themes cover these topics in sometimes overlapping ways, to reveal the culture at the Memorial Fund and its orientation toward learning and social change.

Theme 1: The Memorial Fund’s organizational culture includes norms such as flexibility, process-orientation, reflection, collaboration, relationship-building, and shared leadership.

This section describes the culture of inquiry that exists at the Memorial Fund, with indications of how cultural norms and networks contribute to fostering learning communities. The Memorial Fund’s unique ways of acting were mentioned in nearly every interview and focus group. For example, one interviewee said staff members help communities “in somewhat Grausteinian [*sic*]⁴ ways to ‘see the light’” (Int7). The following Memorial Fund norms are apparent internally, in the workings of the staff, as well as externally, in the Memorial Fund’s interactions with communities.

Flexibility/respect for community. The Memorial Fund is extremely flexible in terms of its willingness to modify its expectations of communities. This norm can be considered in contrast to a strong accountability (“accountability at all costs”) approach in which deadlines are firm and exceptions are not considered. Flexibility can increase trust and willingness to collaborate. One staff member explained it this way:

“We are really kind of flexible, in a way that might suggest that we don’t have accountability on this side – which is not, not the case! But the truth is that the leadership from the top [support] the idea that our job is not to bog this down in administration, but to allow these folks to do their work. So to the extent that you weren’t able to use the money because ‘x’ or ‘y’ came up in your community, but you are able to use that money in six months and you know it is coming and you know you’ll be ready for it then – if the community is good with that, then we’re good with that, despite the fact that that means we are going to have to do some back flips to make sure our accountants are happy....Many of them are grateful – express thanks for flexibility....Our strength is our ability to adjust – we’re good at being nimble....[This]

⁴ Interestingly, several interviewees adopted a creative way to describe the essence of the Graustein Memorial Fund by turning the Graustein name into an adjective of sorts. It is quoted here to demonstrate how respondents attribute the pervasive and particular nature of the culture of the Memorial Fund in linguistic form.

characterizes us in the eyes of the grantees. When something happens they know that we're going to adjust" (Int5).

People may not know or understand the various internal procedures followed at the Memorial Fund or the structured approach staff members take to addressing and resolving questions or problems. However, interviewees articulated the general approach that the Memorial Fund takes, which is "to be very patient, very flexible" (Int1). "They have a humongous capacity to turn a cheek – to spin around. So if it doesn't happen the first time, they'll come around again....It's persistence; they will always try to make it work" (Int7). While there is some level of accountability, one interviewee noted that "One of the concerns, in terms of watching the Memorial Fund work, is that I'm not sure there's much focus on accountability at the Memorial Fund - that you need to actually produce outcomes" (Int3). A participant said, "There has to be more accountability – a system that says, yeah I'm modeling for you, but if you don't do it there are consequences. And I'm not sure the Memorial Fund is always as cognizant of the accountability questions....I've learned about the importance of the dialogue but I've become cautious about whether or not that in and of itself is enough" (Int3). The norm of flexibility is clearly preferred by Fund staff over a norm of accountability, and actually indicates an integrative approach in which relationships and collective creativity are prioritized. In this way, in turn, learning community is supported. This norm also engenders trust with community members because they feel listened to and respected (FG COORDINATORS).

Emphasis on process and dialogue. The communication style "norm" at the Memorial Fund is dialogical and process-oriented. Paralleling the space that is provided for reflection (discussed below), there is space for narrative communication. This might be a feature of foundations, as opposed to direct service agencies, because of the indirect nature of their work, but the communication style at the Memorial Fund "is much more of an intellectual conversation and that often means a paragraph instead of a sentence. A story versus a comment....There is a level of cordiality in the room. Even the hard conversations are had in such a way that they're soft – they don't have sharp edges" (Int5). A community coordinator said, "The whole process part of it was the value of the plan, because we built relationships that were more meaningful" (FG COORDINATORS). Another added, "RBA was a learning curve.⁵ But getting to the product to me was less important than what happened getting to the product" (FG COORDINATORS). "Compared to others, they spend a lot of stylistic and content energy building relationships. They would interpret it as a lot of process. Their tolerance for failure, for 'this is not working, let's try it another way, we'll keep giving you the money' in the main is very positive. You might criticize them for bending too far....That's stylistic bedrock of

Example of flexibility in reporting

From a staff member's perspective:

"We had decided in the last two years that rather than have [the statewide grantees] write up these copious reports that made us smarter but didn't make them smarter...that they did a small report but committed to a half-day meeting where they had to come report to each other – what they had done, what they learned, what they changed, on their individual grant work and on their joint work . And at times that wasn't easy – it was painful – to come to your peers and say "well, you know, this one particular thing, a lot of things went wrong." And it was so painful at one point that they decided to take their joint management work...and reporting much more seriously, and it sort of became a snowball with better outcomes" (Int9).

From a grantee's perspective:

"It was such a relief not to have to write the reports! It was hard at first, but we started to share and realized we could do our work much better if we collaborate" (FG STATEWIDES).

⁵ Results-based accountability (RBA) was introduced to community collaborative as a tool to measure their progress in meeting goals. It involves multiple people in organizations in the community selecting indicators and focusing on shared accountability.

The reflection process

A staff member explained, “We agreed to institutionalize a reflection process. So we actually hold quarterly reflection meetings for internal staff, and we bring in an outside facilitator, and it’s a time where we’ve actually committed to sitting together, talking about issues that are relevant to the work in a structured way. But not coming out with a to-do list....There was some concern early on – were we going to have another meeting where we were going to leave with ‘these are all the things we need to change, these are all the things we need to do’ – that’s not reflection to us....No, we were very intentional about that, that reflection is a process where you can discuss ideas, you don’t have to worry about the budget, you don’t have to worry about staff capacity. It’s just to discuss, with the intention that if you’re thinking more deeply about issues that it will influence the decisions you make and practices you engage in. At times we then analyze what’s come out of the reflection. We certainly distribute notes and stuff; when it’s relevant we do then bring those ideas into a manager’s meeting and that’s the place where it connects with practice or with a decision that needs to be made. But I’m very happy that we’ve really made that commitment faithfully, no matter how busy we are” (Int4).

how they do business....When you get a grant from the Memorial Fund, you will spend a significant portion of the resources on process” (Int7).

The Memorial Fund’s perspective is that, as one staff member put it, “The end isn’t the only thing that is important but how you get there” (Int5). Or, as another phrased it, “We want to build strong partnerships, and because we believe in relationships and long-term relationships, because we believe in transparency and involving people in the decisions that influence them, I would guess that we spend a lot more time getting the work done because we have a certain value base of *how* the work should be done [emphasis added]” (Int4). And a third said, “We ask ourselves some pretty hard questions, and we ask them some pretty hard questions. We don’t expect this to be easy, and we try to be very humble about the fact that we don’t have the answers” (Int1), “we are genuinely interested in learning from communities as much as they might learn from us” (Int6). A community coordinator explained that “with Graustein trust was always there. You could ask questions and you weren’t criticized or thought less of. You could ask for help” (FG COORDINATORS). A consultant noted, “They don’t want to be prescriptive...and that is consistent with [their process orientation]. If you are going to respect process, and help people come together and build in their own unique way, you can’t do that and say ‘and here are the following things you have to produce by Wednesday’” (Int7). Such a process orientation and respect for the community distinguishes the Memorial Fund as an organizational learning community. Members of the Superintendents Network mentioned this in the sense that their “community of practice” functions with transparency “in how we observe and give feedback to each other”. They went on to say, “We have earned each other’s trust through experience. We’ve built this bank of experience – it just grows over time....There’s a step of unbelievable support and encouragement. That has enabled us to discuss almost anything” (FG SUPERINTENDENTS). When time for process and dialogue is provided, colleagues are able to learn about and from each other.

Focus on reflection. “We do it!” said one staff member. She explained, “We’ve institutionalized a reflection process...a time where we’ve actually committed to sitting together, talking about issues that are relevant to the work in a structured way” (Int4). “We knew we had enough practice and enough experience that would be a terrible thing to waste, and that we needed to build that reflective practice in a more deliberate way” (Int1). A staff member explained that they do real reflection in which people say, “‘I’m doing this this way *because*.’ I’ve never seen this anywhere else [I’ve worked]” (Int4). Another staff member said, “There’s a really great capacity to think about the future and what our reflections on the past mean....We are incredibly critical of our process. We sit down and discuss what went wrong, what did we miss, did we set the wrong expectations, did we deliver the wrong kind

of opening message, did the people delivering the message do it the right way, was it about them, about the audience, the timing, the environment?...We are pretty comfortable sharing this critical discussion” (Int5). Another member further explained, “it always feels like we’re in reflection mode, trying to understand what’s going on, revisiting decisions, reporting what we’re hearing, bringing that to our conversations and decisions....If it makes sense we’ve made changes based on that kind of feedback, but never knee-jerk, always with an eye and ear to “are we hearing patterns.” We don’t change every time someone mentions something, so there have been changes based on our learning but it’s not rash (Int6). This reflection practice is an important piece of a learning community, in that it demonstrates supportive conditions in which staff members regularly convene to discover and problem-solve, which also allows for collective creativity. A focus group participant said, “They force us to think about our own actions” (FG LIAISONS). This kind of reflective inquiry encourages people to learn how to learn together.

Dedication to internal and external collaboration. The Memorial Fund emphasizes its work as a collaborative venture, as stated in its objectives and as mentioned in all interviews and focus groups. As one interviewee said, “In order to make progress, all of us need to contribute what we have and work collectively” (Int1). Another noted, “A word we use a lot is collaboration.” The internal culture was probably best described by a third:

“I think our ability to make decisions on things that are outstanding questions could improve. But I think that part of the reason that’s true is because of our need to bring folks to consensus....The idea is to pose the question being addressed with the most people possible weighing in on it....Whenever possible, the preferred method is to make the decision collectively. We’ll include as many people as possible, and that often means beyond just the staff.... When the decision is made, there is a lot of buy in – and very little angst or anxiety once it goes through, but it takes a lot of energy, a lot of time, and sometimes an entire restart....There is sometimes a level of frustration – can we just put this out, can we just finish this? The tolerance for it here is way higher than most....Here it’s nice – there’s this calm. There is the space to have this kind of inclusive decision-making process that doesn’t exist in other places” (Int5).

This internal collaboration is an organizational norm that clearly supports shared vision and shared leadership – both aspects of learning communities – and promotes a general collective aspiration. Many organizations simply state such shared processes as goals, but the Memorial Fund demonstrates commitment to providing formal mechanisms through which colleagues can collaborate. As well, while most organizations provide such opportunities intermittently, the Memorial Fund’s collaborative mechanisms are continuous, which is critical to adult learning.

“I learned to speak out!
Graustein is very
empowering.”
(Parent speaking in a focus group)

The collaborative culture of the Memorial Fund extends to partners they support and with whom they work. One interviewee explained, “In the last several years, they’ve become much more collaborative on levels that are different from traditional grantmaking. They always saw partnerships with communities as collaborative, but the new partnerships with State government have...become a style piece....I don’t think you’ll see one person on their staff who isn’t willing to collaborate – that’s just not who they hire” (Int7). In their recent, year-long strategic planning process, they placed high value on listening to many voices (Int4; Int7; Int3; Int 5; FG LIAISONS; FG COORDINATORS) and included approximately 300 people in that process (www.wcgmf.org).

One staff member included this aspect in his definition of the Memorial Fund, saying, “We support communities’ efforts to improve early childhood education [by] having many voices at the table and including a variety of stakeholders (parents, teachers, business, municipal leaders)” (Int5). Indeed, one consultant said, “It was almost cacophony, too many voices,” (Int7) but it is part of their culture to amass as many different perspectives as possible. “They try to make sure they have voices such as parents whose voices often aren’t heard, voices of people of color who often aren’t heard. I think it’s one of the things they are very conscious of doing” (Int3). If there are any voices left out, a staff member suggests they might be those of “parents of young children not being served” (Int6) and the consequence of this is that, “the design of services for families are decided by individuals that are not recipients of those services and may miss really important information....The aim is that if those voices are at the table and these kinds of problems are identified and those who have the real power to advocate and do often, then they can really address the issues that stand in the way” (Int6). This effort toward inclusive collaboration encourages a symbiotic relationship in which the communities actually help the Memorial Fund succeed in its efforts. It also demonstrates the Memorial Fund’s willingness to learn from others by including them in important conversations.

This type of collaboration, as a “social norm” of the Memorial Fund, translates into a form of empowerment and trust, in that when people in the community ask the Memorial Fund staff to do things for them, “we actually resist it, because of a philosophy of not doing for others what they can do for themselves and not wanting to encourage dependency and really believing that the voices at the table in the community have that power” (Int4). This also evidences the importance of webs of relationships in which the collaboration between two entities is stronger than either of the two entities on their own (Wheatley, 2006).

A signature feature of collaboration at the Memorial Fund is its action-orientation. As stated by a staff member, “Collaboration is one of the most fascinating and most difficult aspects of the job... because it means that you’re not only just listening to somebody who thinks differently or from a different perspective but you’re agreeing to *move forward* with those folks [emphasis added]” (Int1). Such agreements exemplify the way in which the Memorial Fund not only supports activities but considers themselves partners with those they support, thus forming functioning networks (discussed in more detail in the next section) which are necessary for social capital.

Challenges to collaboration

Despite the desire of Fund staff and partners to collaborate, there are several challenges to collaboration. For grantees it can be difficult. A consultant explained it this way: “The difficulty sometimes in getting guidance, for the grantee who likes guidance, is harder. Because of the desire and style that emphasizes openness, and let’s think about it before we decide, let’s collaborate – it just takes a long time to reach closure. And when they don’t reach closure they call for more process!” (Int7). It might seem that the difficult nature of this approach (the lack of guidance in particular) would increase the likelihood of some to “defect,” i.e., to opt out of participation. However, the Memorial Fund’s flexibility makes the cost to defectors high. In other words, because the Memorial Fund is “easy to work with,” (FG COORDINATORS), it is worth it to continue participation even through difficult periods. Flexibility and communication processes therefore contribute to the growth of social capital. Collaboration can also be difficult on a practical level among those whose work does not normally or naturally (or historically) intersect. At one point the staff thought, “Shouldn’t the work we’re doing with organizations meet the work we’re doing with communities? Communities have a voice and a mass of people that can contribute to the work organizations are doing on statewide level; the organizations have some level of expertise and capacity that they can lend to the work of local communities. Conceptually that makes sense, but the practicality proves much more difficult, because the level of communication and readiness that either group has at any particular time is a little bit trickier” (Int5). This means that while collaboration, trust and capacity to make change locally (as an outcome of social capital) might be increasing

horizontally within communities, it is not necessarily increasing vertically, between communities and organizations with more political power to make larger-scale policy change.

Relationships and responsiveness to local realities. A central feature of the Memorial Fund’s organizational culture is its focus on relationships. Relationship-building fosters trust, and in turn increases the effectiveness of learning communities and generates social capital. Nearly all staff members mentioned the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships with grantees, other partners, and each other. A consultant said, “Their style of not beating up a grantee when they don’t succeed is also very solid. So you get a really safe relationship between grantee and grantor” (Int7). “We can be responsive to their realities, and not rigid about our ivory tower expectations....There is a real intent to honor that our grantees work in a real world where they don’t have endowments, they don’t have the luxury of space and time to make decisions the way we make them. We’re aware that that’s our reality and not theirs. That’s our biggest strength – our flexibility and our eagerness to “meet them where they are” (Int5). This kind of responsiveness requires effective listening, reciprocal positive relationships, and bi-directional trust (Fund <—> community). Such norms of engagement are necessary for social capital.

The respectful relationships the Memorial Fund maintains with communities can be seen in its responsiveness to community voices. For example, during the strategic planning process, communities were requesting parent information. This was something “we really didn’t want to be involved in, but there was such a strong call for it, we said ‘we can’t walk away from all this input and not do something.’ [We should] figure out what our role is, but do *something*” (Int4).

An example of the focus on relationships came from explanations of the role of community liaisons. The liaisons’ work developed out of a need to “maintain relationships,” with and within communities, and ultimately “it evolved into...the concept of a critical friend” (Int5). Their role is not a “facilitator of change;” rather it is to build capacity in the communities (FG LIAISONS). The way the liaisons build capacity is “intimate,” “micro-level” and “responsive to immediate things happening in the community” (FG LIAISONS).

There is some form of tension between the liaisons as neutral relationship-builders and advocates for the communities they serve. “Liaisons are meant to be these objective, neutral, critical friend mirrors, although part of the learning is that they can’t build the trust of communities and remain entirely neutral or objective. I think it’s some kind of fantasy that someone can be in a community for that long, and provide that kind of coaching and play that role and remain completely neutral” (Int5). In one case, a liaison had been somewhat advocating on behalf of community members and did not recognize how that detracted from the power in the community. “Having stepped back, and in conversations with us, the liaison really saw the need to facilitate but not advocate. It was really about the community collaborative coming into its own and taking steps forward” (Int5). At times, the liaisons struggle with this balance in their efforts to build and maintain strong, trusting relationships with community members (FG LIAISONS).

Another example of how relationships build trust and support came from members of the Superintendents’ Network. They noted that in their network certain norms are enacted so that “we have a lot of strong opinions but I’ve never heard anyone belittled in this community” (FG SUPERINTENDENTS). Relationships are strengthened through the strong singular purpose of the group. They said, “Everyone feels a stake in one another’s success. It’s important to me when someone reports that our visit has been a success. You feel part of that success” (FG SUPERINTENDENTS).

Leadership style. Leadership style generally guides culture in organizations. Leadership and decision-making at the Memorial Fund tends to be non-hierarchical. “Who is involved in what is not neatly subsumed in boxes

and organizational charts. It's more situational" (Int3). Decision-making is largely shared within the Memorial Fund, among management team members. This approach indicates that the Executive Director (ED) trusts his staff, distributes power, and is willing to learn from others. One potential drawback to this is drawn out decision-making. "When you're that focused on process you tend to not make decisions quickly....Some of their work does not have a cut and dried answer, so they're hoping that more dialogue will clarify what the right answer will be. Sometimes you've got to make decisions on limited amounts of information!" (Int7). However, the need for quick decision-making is not strong, so the Memorial Fund's process-oriented approach generally works well for them.

Furthering his shared leadership approach, the ED "takes a very visible, active role" in external networking and policy work (Int1). He is "the embodiment of this institution's real commitment and focus on early childhood...and brings with him reinforcement to the folks who are out there doing hard work that they are not alone" (Int1). In this way, the ED inspires confidence and trust. People sense that "he's in it for the long haul" (Int4). "He really cares, and seriously considers and respects everybody's contributions (Int6). The "amount of transparency and modeling" (Int4) by the ED helps others commit. This level of commitment, as a cultural feature of the Memorial Fund, is evident in staff longevity. Several staff members have worked there for a decade or more and remain very dedicated to their work.

Low tolerance for conflict

Several interviewees mentioned a low tolerance for conflict at the Memorial Fund. It is perhaps an effect of the high value placed on collaboration and consensus on the part of the Executive Director as well as the staff. A staff member commented, "There is not a full comfort with conflict in the room. Confrontation is not the way that we operate" (Int5). Another said, "We're not really good at managing conflict... I think we have all gotten the message that unless you absolutely have to, don't bring your conflict [to the table] – figure it out, deal with it...I think we do step around conflict" (Int6). This cultural norm might compromise effective communication or outcomes at times, and there is a possibility that this could also impact the extent to which conflict is tolerated in communities. As an aspect of learning communities, integrating conflict into conversation is important for the advancement of thinking and can be useful for challenging the status quo. Discomfort with conflict points to a slight dissonance in that while diversity of voice is actively sought by the Memorial Fund, diversity often entails difference of experience and opinion, but these differences may be shut down (purposefully or advertently) because of the discomfort with conflict. Good ideas might consequently be lost.

High tolerance for risk

An interesting norm at the Memorial Fund is what was described as risk-taking. The Memorial Fund has "spent a lot of energy not replicating models of [other similar foundations]. They work very hard at a very different style. It is probably one of their strongest assets.... This foundation will invest in something relatively risky – not risky in terms of being controversial, but risky in terms of whether it will produce any real result. Their tolerance for risk is high" (Int7). Risk-taking is a component of any learning community that is in a continual cycle of experimentation and analysis. This is what is meant by praxis in the education field (Freire, 1994), in which learning takes place through design (decision-making), action (implementation), reflection (evaluation/assessment), new design, action, reflection, etc.

Theme 2: The Memorial Fund's theory of change and the concept of sustainability were either not universally understood or not articulated.

Theory of change

Organizational culture at the Memorial Fund is related to their theory of change. One interviewee said, “our theory of change depends on involved parents and involved community” (Int1); another said, “part of our theory of change is that if you expand and can have more communities involved in advocacy for children in a collective way, that there’s a better chance of influencing state level policy and practice to benefit children” (Int4). However, it is important to note that almost none of the interviewees – other than a few staff members – could articulate the theory of change (FG COORDINATORS; FG LIAISONS; FG PARENTS). One non-staff member explained, “It’s largely that if you bring people together around the collaborative table you will produce better outcomes for kids....It requires a broad-based coalition of efforts to change life outcomes” (Int3).

In one focus group, the discussion went like this:

“Not sure...if I can articulate it. Maybe we can do it in tandem – each one can add on.”

“To serve children, and there are the four objectives.”

“I would go the other way, that it’s inclusive, broad-based, parent voice, collaboration. Change happens through collaborative systems in communities, influencing policy, communities where they are rather than dictate where they ought to be.”

“I think long-term policy and systems change comes from those who are directly impacted by the problem. It is to the end result of serving children” (FG LIAISONS).

In summary, there was not a clear, coherent understanding of the Memorial Fund’s theory of change among the non-staff participants.

Sustainability

There was almost no mention of sustainability among interviewees; in fact, the Executive Director was the only respondent to use the term without prompting. Social capital relies on sustainability, in that trust, norms and networks are built over time and can disintegrate without purposeful efforts toward guaranteeing (or attempting to guarantee) their continuation. Also, such continuation is critical when organizations engage in the kind of social change that the Memorial Fund does, which takes shape slowly and sees success largely through small gains over time. When asked about sustainability, one staff member mentioned that “Capacity-building work has been around local systems... And hopefully it will start to institutionalize in the community, to use local resources to decrease dependence on us” (Int4). A consultant mentioned that sustainability is “not a priority” and that time has not been spent “figuring out the structure for a sustainable network” (Int8). If discussion and planning for sustainability is not a norm in the culture of the Memorial Fund, we might wonder what the incentive is for communities to carry on their work without Fund support, as well as the ability to generate ongoing social capital and, in turn, social change. The recent economic crisis did force some thinking about this. For example, when asked about sustainability of activities in the communities, a participant in the liaison focus group said, “Very few have thought about this; but others now are rudely awakened that they need to be....There was the sense that this was not going to go on forever. That’s changed now, so communities are looking inwardly and saying how can it be sustained? Who is going to pay?” (FG LIAISONS). The crisis has therefore spurred, rather inadvertently, some collective creativity around learning how to sustain community and statewide efforts in early childhood, perhaps more possible and more likely to

succeed because of the learning culture promoted by the Memorial Fund because affiliates are used to working collaboratively to solve difficult problems.

Theme 3: Networks connected to the Memorial Fund are plentiful and varied.

Networks

If a network is basically defined as the interconnection of entities or people, we could add to the definition by suggesting that such interconnection has a purpose (technical, social, political, etc.) and that the network facilitates communication and information-sharing, and serves to support those it connects. Horizontal and vertical networks are essential elements of social capital, as they serve to link people who can then build trust with each other through shared norms of reciprocity, both within and across levels of societal and political power. While a few staff described activities in terms of functioning networks, the idea of networks was not expressed by non-staff participants as an explicit focus of the Memorial Fund. The term was not top of mind for participants, especially focus group participants. Many examples of networks were nevertheless given by

“We’d like to think we’re an equal part of the network, but something closer to reality is that maybe we are something like a critical connector.”
-Fund staff member

almost all respondents. Probably the most common was the community collaborative, in which local community members are connected and build trust as they pursue early childhood initiatives in their community. The emphasis of the Memorial Fund has been on building relationships, and one interviewee asked, self-reflectively, “When does a relationship become a network?” (Int5). There is the question of where the Memorial Fund itself fits in a network of activities it supports. “Are we an equal dot or node in that network, or are we the hub” one

interviewee questioned. As a funder and facilitator, the Memorial Fund is essential to maintaining the larger network. A staff member said, “Some of that network would continue to exist without us, but a great deal of that network would dissolve without us” (Int5). Another staff member said, “I don’t think we’re at a point yet where, if we disappeared, all of these [networks] would stay in place. And that’s frustrating to us, because we’ve been doing this for so long. So that’s a challenge.... Even though we’ve always considered ourselves doing system-building work, we’re thinking more about how that happens, so we can be just one player and not the organizing or central player” (Int4). “I believe we’ve developed an informal network of communities, in that there’s no authority or jurisdiction, but [we have a] relationship and connection to these communities [which are] all working in similar ways” (Int6).

Sometimes it is difficult to effectively connect the communities with each other, to provide a sense of being part of a network larger than one particular community. At one time, the communities asked for Discovery to be “branded” (Int6; Int4), to provide “a sense of belonging to something and wanting that to be formalized and more explicit....We’ve actually shied away from that because we don’t view ourselves as organizing but we would love it if they would organize themselves” (Int6). In contrast, regarding how the Memorial Fund encourages networks beyond the community level, a consultant said, “I think they have been intentional about nurturing networks....They’ve tried to make linkages between the public sector and some of the grantees, and sometimes that has worked and sometimes it hasn’t” (Int7).

In a stable system, a given network or tie should be solid enough to stand on its own, without reliance on other networks or nodes. But in a well-functioning system, networks are also interdependent, so that work is supported from various sectors and sources, accountability is higher, and positive outcomes are more likely.

At the Memorial Fund, there are networks of people, in which each individual might be strongly connected to between five and 25 other individuals, and there are networks of groups, which might be connected to each other directly or via a particular individual. The stability of all the networks is not clear, and attending to this should improve relationships, the systemic stability of the work, and sustainability.

Horizontal networks: Horizontal networks connect people of essentially equal power or “status.” Staff members, community coordinators, and liaisons considered each community collaborative to be a network unto itself (FG LIAISONS; FG COORDINATORS; Int6), although it should be noted that there is verticality in the local groups as well, in that the collaborative members are often of unequal local status (i.e., parents and mayors). The collaboratives do not generally network across communities. “There’s one community that meets with other Discovery communities near them for coffee and to catch up. So there seems to be this network developing” (Int6). A community coordinator said, “Someone is organizing a coordinators meeting. I just went to the first one – it’s organized outside of the Memorial Fund, just the coordinators deciding to get together. It was wonderful. We talked about everything” (FG COORDINATORS). A coordinator suggested that liaisons can play an important role here, “a type of network hub” to connect communities with each other (FG COORDINATORS). Regarding the potential strengthening of community collaboratives through regional networking, various respondents explained that there is some regionalization, but it is very difficult, as Connecticut has “very balkanized” towns/school districts. (Int7). “At the beginning of Discovery, some communities immediately said we can’t do this alone, and tried to come in as a regional collection of communities [but] it didn’t work, partly because there was no local infrastructure to support the bigger regional work, so the regional work kind of fell flat when it went back into communities” (Int5). Nevertheless there are three regional networks currently running. Related to this, community coordinators mentioned that “We need something like a round table among coordinators at least quarterly. It would be nice if they brought back regional funding, especially because the families in our area do move around quite a bit” (FG COORDINATORS) – in this way they could be resources for each other in supporting those families.

A question becomes how sustainable community networks are outside Memorial Fund support. One staff member said, “I really don’t know...if it would fall apart or if the relationships would continue. Right now they’re still too dependent on our funding....As we move forward and figure out ways for communities to begin to institutionalize and become more responsible themselves for the work, I think that’s when [the network] will be sustained” (Int6). To be sustained, horizontal networks among separate entities should be in some way formalized and joint work required.

Vertical networks: Vertical networks are generally those that connect those with little power⁶ to those with more power to make change. “If you want something to change, you have to have some idea of who the players are, whose door to knock on. If you want something to happen for very young children, often people don’t know what door to knock on” (Int1). Therefore the Memorial Fund’s work is often around making “a more coordinated access point for parents and users of early care” (Int1). The Memorial Fund has formed partnerships with the State of Connecticut, and upon reflection, as one interviewee said, “In terms of process...and being politically smart, it was the right decision. It changes the way you relate to the structure” (Int1). At first, “they felt limited in terms of influencing public policy because of the constraints of private philanthropy. The minute they put money in they were allowed to talk, to be asked, and some of the times they weren’t being asked - they were telling” (Int7). This reflects the new role that philanthropy is playing in the USA and elsewhere as a network

⁶ Power here refers to formal authority to make decisions, usually in the public sphere.

connector to policy (Ball, 2008). It is important to note also that in Discovery communities, local vertical networks exist among parents, community members, and political figures as community collaboratives. Such vertical networks can greatly impact local policymaking.

Listserv: As a network, there is a lot of potential for the listserv to be useful. There were varying opinions however on how much it is accessed. A staff member said the listserv is “pretty active—there’s a lot of activity on there with people exchanging ideas” (Int5). The community coordinators who participated in the focus group and the liaisons admitted to not using the listserv as much as they could or should, although they found it helpful when they did access it (FG COORDINATORS; FG LIAISONS). As one liaison mentioned, “It’s a valuable repository of information, ideas, and tools that people have used and shared over the past several years” (FG LIAISONS).

Loose relationships: There are a number of loose relationships that staff describe as coming together to support early childhood education, even if they do not necessarily support each other’s work directly. These differ from networks because there may not be an enduring shared interest and there might not be trust among the participants. It was mentioned that if the Memorial Fund exits a particular network, only those strongly connected will remain connected. One staff member gave what she thought was a strong example of a network – that of early care providers and kindergarten teachers. “They never talked, they were never in the same room, they were never given any clear communications of how to relate to one another, or how what they did related to one another, so I think it’s very easy there to see the impact of building that network of people who touch very young children’s lives....The local collaborative takes the initiative on... that networking” (Int1). In some cases such a network might endure, in others it will remain or revert back to a loose relationship that may or may not be sustained over time.

Theme 4: Policy work and advocacy are built upon networks and systemic thinking and contribute to social change.

Policy/Advocacy

“Working with them I feel like I can change the world!” (FG COORDINATORS)

While advocacy has been a main focus of the Memorial Fund from its inception, not everyone sees the work in that way. When Discovery started, “many of the people involved at the community level were already involved in programs [and] it was not always viewed as advocacy by them” (Int4). “There’s been a very intentional [effort], through our liaison capacity-building, to really try to get people to make that shift to more systems-thinking, advocacy-thinking, rather than ‘let’s fund programs.’” (Int4). For example, a community might want to put on an event or forge a partnership with a library, and the staff members try to encourage them to frame the activities as community development – a way of engaging people in a larger perspective of the work, rather than just programs, it helps to build a broader systemic strategy. One staff member said they think about “what skills ordinary citizens, parents, need, and what help do they need, in order to move the process of policy change” (Int1). Networks help advocacy efforts, as they provide vertical linkages that connect people with differing levels of power to make change.

The Memorial Fund has partnered with the state on public-private initiatives, and one consultant noted the distinction between working independently versus collaboratively, saying, “they’re not outside any more, they’re inside the tent, and that already changes things” (Int7). In other words, by collaborating with the state as a partner, the Memorial Fund is no longer positioned wholly outside the decision-making system. This can have advantages, as the Memorial Fund might be better able to influence change from within the system. But it is important to note that the Memorial Fund is neither fully nor permanently part of the state, and therefore should not be considered an “insider.” As one consultant put it, “They were interested in a theory of change, but I was interested in where you put your money, because that is how policy is determined. It is not determined by philosophy, it’s determined by where the transactions occur” (Int7). Thus, the ability of the Memorial Fund to collaborate in public-private initiatives enhances their ability to have an effect on policymaking.

They have continuously maintained “public will building” as part of their work, which connects to policy. Best explained by an interviewee:

“Early on public will building was primarily...communications. It focused on the general awareness about early childhood. It also encompassed surveying – and it involved that connection between bringing the public’s knowledge up and policy leader’s knowledge up, and building that will to make things happen which moves you into public policy. It became pretty evident that if the government did not get involved in early childhood, the foundation was not going to [make change] by itself. So that was the piece that glued the research, the advocacy and the local work” (Int7).

The Memorial Fund uses its reputation effectively despite any limitations of its sphere of influence. One interviewee said, “They feel the limits of their influence. When they are the small player at the table with a larger player, there is a limit....I think they’re probably frustrated, like a lot of us, at their inability to bring early childhood to the tipping point. They keep getting up and trying, but they have a tolerance for not getting there. Externally, I don’t think they [have] a lot of choice – what are they going to do, especially when they don’t have the most marbles in the game? You use the reputation that you have and your influence and your stature to try to move the issue. They’re very good at that” (Int7). Another said, “They are a powerful voice for children in the state and they are independent and their reputation is created by their acts over a period of time, going back to the passage of the legislation on school readiness....There is really nobody else in the state that is a foundation that has as clear of a focus as they do. They’re not the largest foundation in the state but [powerful] because of [the Executive Director] being visible as a key player and serving on the early childhood cabinet and other forums and being willing to go out and represent the Memorial Fund (Int3). The latter part of this comment speaks directly to the important role networks play, especially vertical networks, in gaining political influence. The Memorial Fund’s reputation is entwined with its organizational style, or culture, which is typified by the various elements outlined above.

Theme 5: The Memorial Fund provides learning spaces both internally and externally.

Providing learning opportunities

The Memorial Fund is a hub of learning both internally and externally. There is a noticeable “Fund-speak” in which staff members talk about “the learning” they experience from various initiatives, reflection, and

dialogue (Int5, Int4). A type of intentional learning space (formal education) is capacity-building, provided by liaisons or other consultants to the communities in which they work (FG LIAISONS). “Our capacity-building to some extent is meant to introduce them to each other – so most of our capacity-building has built into it opportunities for communities to have a peer exchange.” (Int5). This capacity-building is “tailored towards the different levels of readiness” and needs in communities (Int5) and helps the Memorial Fund meet its objective of having every group working on behalf of children function as a learning organization. To the extent that capacity-building activities connect people who may not otherwise meet each other, even if they do not function as an on-going learning community, establishes them as a network. Another example is Stone Soup, an annual conference for grantees, staff, and other interested individuals. “It’s a way to hear what the grantees are doing, and things that we do collectively” (Int4). It provides physical space, time, and opportunity to form caring and collegial relationships (FG COORDINATORS) – all indicators of a learning community.

Also in line with the fourth belief included in the Introduction, that “Every institution educating or working with children needs to be a learning organization,” the Fund facilitates, enables, or nurtures a number of learning communities among its discrete affiliate groups. In fact, the Memorial Fund structures its work in such a way that learning communities are created. For example, the *liaisons* work independently in communities around the state, and in their interactions with local coordinators they build local learning communities through “coaching,” asking “probing questions,” and taking advantage of “teachable moments” (FG LIAISONS). They emphasized that “The Memorial Fund makes concerted efforts to provide communities with learning tools” through capacity-building or planning processes (FG LIAISONS). However, they are also simultaneously engaged in semi-structured monthly conversations as a group themselves, together with Fund staff members, to discuss their work, their challenges, and their successes. This has been a very powerful learning structure for the liaisons, who support each other and see avenues to improvement they might not see on their own (FG LIAISONS; Int5; Int4; Int6). One liaison said, “The Memorial Fund has required us to think hard. I often leave Memorial Fund meetings really exhilarated” (FG LIAISONS). Part of the reason it works so well is because it is ongoing, thereby encouraging expectations (for participation and contribution) among members and nurturing trust and respect when those expectations are met (FG LIAISONS).

Representatives of the four core *statewide organizations* that are partly funded by the Memorial Fund (Connecticut Parent Power, Connecticut Association of Human Services, Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, and Connecticut Voices for Children) explained that they grew from a network of disparate colleagues into a learning community. With the Memorial Fund’s assistance, they began to meet together and share their work, their ideas, and their plans. They now meet on their own in what they call a “Tuesday club,” outside of the Memorial Fund, for mutual benefit. “We discuss, strategize, talk about what we can contribute, plan next steps, assign roles” (FG STATEWIDES). “We realized that we meet objectives more effectively” when collaborating, and there is a “sense of capacity, trust, and common perspective that allows us to work well” (FG STATEWIDES). They feel that they can “raise questions and problem-solve with trust, collegiality, and professionalism” (FG STATEWIDES). Although they do not continue to receive support from the Memorial Fund to meet regularly for this shared work on their own, they do so because “It’s in our collective best interest to continue meeting” (FG STATEWIDES). This sense of commitment they demonstrate confirms that they have moved from a network to a learning community.

An example of a purposefully established learning community is the *Connecticut Superintendents Network*, which is supported in part by the Memorial Fund. It self-identifies as a “community of practice” (Int3; FG SUPERINTENDENTS), which could be considered a specific type of learning community. Members have a very clear focus on a particular professional practice and a high level of accountability which enhances productive engagement (FG SUPERINTENDENTS). As they explained it, “There is a central focus for the work - how we do it and how we refine it.... There is a professional accountability. What we learn from this we take back to our

practice” (FG SUPERINTENDENTS). They have been deliberate about creating protocols of activity and have instituted measures to assess the quality of their interactions, which has resulted in significant learning gains (City *et al*, 2009). The Network was constructed very carefully (membership is by nomination and invitation) and is run with close coordination by the Connecticut Center for School Change. Importantly, this learning community, because of its regulated creation, is quite unique and not easy to replicate. One participant said, “I don’t want to underestimate the way that our work is structured by the Center. I remember at the beginning it was awkward and we didn’t want to be confined by the protocols, but you learn after a while that it’s the protocols that allow you to be productive. There is quite a bit of brilliance about how our meetings are structured....And the fact that it evolves over time means that the Center is responsive to our needs, but I think we wouldn’t be nearly as successful in learning from each other if the Center wasn’t as focused about it” (FG SUPERINTENDENTS). Another unique aspect of this learning community is the involvement of Dr. Richard Elmore of Harvard University. He regularly works with the group, and provides what one participant described as “inspirational fear” to do the work with commitment, honesty and seriousness of purpose. The participants said, “There is an intensity about him. He brings a laser-like response that is very quick...and he has from time to time really challenged individuals” (FG SUPERINTENDENTS). They explained that although they are generally a self-assured group, Dr. Elmore raised the level of accountability in part based on their shared understanding that “his challenge to us was not gentle, but...you know that every time he opens his mouth you’re going to learn something....You might be uncomfortable for a moment, but you’re going to learn” (FG SUPERINTENDENTS).

Community coordinators, who organize community meetings, negotiate among community members, and plan activities and outreach, among other things, encourage networks of individuals and organizations on behalf of young children. Some of those networks become learning communities, if enough positive relationships are formed and trust is built. One coordinator said, “Graustein pushes the community to higher levels of thinking” (FG COORDINATORS). There is a “learning curve” involved in working with the Memorial Fund, and one coordinator noted that “some of their definitions can be restrictive if you were not in on the beginning – like what the heck is a honeycomb? But we get a lot of assistance and support” (FG COORDINATORS). Coordinators found that meeting with each other during the focus group was extremely beneficial, in that they exchanged information and were able to compare and contrast their experiences. They rarely have the opportunity to do so, and if they could their work would improve (FG COORDINATORS; FG LIAISONS).

In the communities themselves, people do come together in order to pursue a common interest (e.g., early childhood services) but they are loosely networked and would be unlikely to come together on an ongoing basis without the efforts of the community coordinators and liaisons (FG COORDINATORS; FG LIAISONS). One of the liaisons noted, “The idea of a peer learning network has been slow to catch on, but it’s starting to happen” (FG LIAISONS).

Theme 6: The Memorial Fund is playing an important role in building the opportunity for parents to function as a learning community.

The Memorial Fund staff members are aware that parents cannot be considered a learning community as such at this time, but the hope is that this will develop over time. It would be very important for this to happen, not only because they are invested constituents in early childhood policy change and have the most intimate knowledge of children’s and families’ needs, but also because they do not often have access to relevant information, have skills necessary to participate effectively, or have connections to centers of power (FG PARENTS). As important as they therefore are, it is very difficult to develop a sustainable learning community of parents for several reasons. First, logistics are an impediment, as parents are a disparate group with no central meeting space or common set of beliefs (FG PARENTS). Parents have time constraints and child care challenges (FG COORDINATORS). Second, parents of young children are by definition a temporary constituency because their children grow up and their interests change accordingly (Int7). Third, parents need varying amounts of education on any given topic in order to make informed decisions and take informed action. The community coordinators raised an interesting challenge regarding how to define the role of “parent” at the collaborative table in communities, particularly for those parents who also work in other capacities or “wear different hats” relevant to the conversation. Although there is good reason for defining parents in such a way that she or he can only speak as a parent and not as, for example, a DCF worker if she or he happens to be one, some coordinators felt that this was too restrictive. It also results in loss of parent voice if a parent plays two roles in daily life but at the collaborative table he or she can only speak from their professional position and cannot offer potentially helpful insights from a parent perspective. An added problem as explained by a coordinator is that some parents who fit the “parent only” definition are the ones most worried about meeting the basic needs of their families and children (because they are not working) and least likely to be able to participate consistently at the table (FG COORDINATORS). There is parent engagement to the extent that parents mobilize to demonstrate at the State Capitol and speak to legislators about early childhood care and education. They also work in local communities to meet local needs through fundraising and other activities. If they could be encouraged to participate even more, they might have the opportunity to develop leadership skills which will potentially help them resolve some of their other issues.

Parents would like to meet together more often. They recognize that it is important to “not only have a voice at the table – but [the group] will give us power at the table” (FG PARENTS).

Toward the end of the parent focus group discussion, several parents commented that they “learned something just by coming here tonight” (FG PARENTS). One parent said, “I’ve moved from ‘I’m only a parent’ to trying to change legislators’ mindsets” since participating in Fund-supported activities. Another parent said they are trying to “expand the network” of Connecticut Parent Power beyond the center of the state, and another said the Memorial Fund has invited them to meetings about upcoming legislation, for example. A benefit of having what might now be considered loosely related parent groups or somewhat weak networks develop into one or more learning communities is that communities tend to sustain themselves beyond individuals, held together through trust, shared norms and values, and supportive leadership. Parents, like coordinators, would like to meet together more often, as they recognize that it is important to “not only have a voice at the table – but [the group] will give us power at the table” (FG PARENTS).

Part III: Conclusion

When the spirit of inquiry permeates the daily routine, an organization can be considered a true learning community. The findings above provide evidence of the myriad ways in which the Memorial Fund exemplifies a learning community at its organizational core, and how the various groups affiliated with the Memorial Fund engage as learning communities to greater or lesser extents. As part of their objectives, the Memorial Fund has set out to partner and work together with others, to listen to multiple voices, and to encourage learning through “intellectual development, information sharing and teamwork” (www.wcgmf.org). Data collected during this research revealed very consistent opinions and experiences of those interviewed with the Memorial Fund’s commitment to those objectives.

Simultaneously, evidence of social capital was found as participants described the trust built among staff and grantees and among various grantees themselves. A number of organizational norms distinguish the Memorial Fund from other organizations and foster reciprocity among the many partners involved. Networks function to connect various entities, with the Memorial Fund’s organizational core acting as a “critical connector.” Social capital is therefore in evidence. The extent to which the social capital being grown through the Memorial Fund’s fostering of trust, norms and networks is able to impact larger social change and policy is questionable however, because of the varying strength of vertical networks that connect community members with policymakers. However, the role played by the Memorial Fund’s Executive Director in carrying the Memorial Fund’s culture and purpose to the policy arena is widely recognized. As one interviewee said, the Memorial Fund has established “various sorts of networks” that involve bringing people together “on the notion of people learning from each other...although I’m not sure to what extent they really are learning communities” (Int3). It is important to note the helpfulness of having a network act as – or *grow into* – a learning community because, as mentioned by one staff member, “if people don’t have shared work to do, then the relationship is fleeting...” (Int4) and if there is no relationship, the energy and power of the network tie disappears. A staff member said, “if we can foster some type of shared work, I think that’s going to be useful to network development” (Int4). When these sharing meetings take place in a structured fashion, with commitment and accountability, they may be moving toward a learning community or a community of practice. Given the well-understood cultural norms of the Memorial Fund by participants, and the trust that is built through the Memorial Fund’s particular approach to grantmaking, the opportunity arises to consolidate networks around the Memorial Fund mission in a way that these networks both grow social capital and become learning communities. However, at this time not all networks are engaged in shared learning. Perhaps better terminology for the activity of Fund staff would be a community of practices, since the Memorial Fund does not identify one practice for improvement as the Superintendent’s Network does, but rather seeks to improve several practices in order to meet their objectives.

Several staff members and other interviewees mentioned that historically, emphasis has consciously been placed on building relationships, but that relationships alone are not enough to make change (Int4, Int7, FG LIAISONS). Now “we’re pushing more on outcomes” (Int4) with the introduction of a results-based accountability approach. They ask “[First], have you gotten enough people to the table, enough momentum, to engage in system work, and now let’s focus on how we’re really trying to impact children’s lives” (Int4). The questions that follow attempt to push staff members, consultants and all members of the extended Memorial Fund family to reflect on their efforts in new ways.

Probing questions:

Several questions emerged from the data collection process. Staff members might want to consider these questions as they move forward with their work. These questions should also be applicable to similar organizations working to make social change. Each question is preceded by an observational statement or two that emerged through data analysis.

- ❖ In order to strengthen the ability of participants to contribute to making the change outlined in the Memorial Fund's theory, it might help if the theory could be clearly and simply communicated to actors outside of Fund staff. How can the Memorial Fund's theory of change be promoted so that external individuals can articulate it?
- ❖ Often, when occurring in a constructive spirit among a group of people with shared goals, conflict can provide unexpected breakthroughs in understanding and opportunities for personal and professional growth among group members. How can healthy divergence of opinion and conflict be encouraged at the Memorial Fund, in the interest of ensuring honesty, openness, and collective creativity, but without losing collaborative spirit?
- ❖ If sustainability is not on the forefront of the agenda and the minds of staff members, social change can be disadvantaged. What is important to sustain (i.e., ways of working, local capacity to make change)? How can sustainability of learning communities, as seen with the statewide representatives as well as with the superintendents, be encouraged? As well, when there is flexible accountability regarding grant implementation, does the positively intentioned approach of adapting to the community work and community needs hamper long-term viability of early childhood outcomes? What is the incentive for communities to carry on without Memorial Fund support, if they have the sense that there will not likely be an end to this support, except in extreme situations?
- ❖ A question arises as to whether it is possible to create a high-functioning learning community with an inclusive, diverse group of people. How might the tension between inclusiveness and effectiveness/efficiency be addressed?
- ❖ The Superintendents Network is a high-functioning learning community, but their work occurs through very structured facilitation, which is more "synthetic" than "organic." Is it possible to implement some of their strategies (norms, protocols, etc.) in more organically forming communities to increase the learning among participants? As well, how can their experience of participating in a learning community encourage greater participation of superintendents at communities' collaborative tables?
- ❖ Two focus group discussions – with community coordinators and with parents – revealed that while logistically difficult to organize, participants felt they had benefitted tremendously from just the one hour together. Information and experiences were shared and new connections were formed. How could collaboration among community coordinators and among parents be strengthened?
- ❖ As an important element of social capital, vertical networks empower the less powerful in society by linking them with power holders. How might vertical networks between community members/parents and policymakers (power-holders) be enhanced and measured, both at local and state levels?
- ❖ The Memorial Fund is interested in sustainability and social change, and building sustainable networks can help achieve those aims. How might the Memorial Fund bring the concept and mechanisms of network-

- ❖ With the understanding that fostering learning communities is a clear objective of management staff, it is interesting that it did not come across as such from the interviews or focus groups. How could the distinction between community work in general and the development of learning communities more specifically be instilled?
- ❖ The terms “network,” “community,” and “learning community” might have different connotations and different meanings for different people. Might it be helpful for the staff to provide a clear distinction of how they see these concepts – on their own and in relation to each other – in the interest of promoting their objectives and work with communities? Also, it can happen that less credible or unsanctioned information is circulated through networks. How might staff pre-empt or attend to this potential downside to networks?

The unique ways of working that the Memorial Fund inhabits has encouraged learning communities to take seed, root, and grow, which in turn creates potential for greater change. This change is the added value to the Memorial Fund’s work, and is an outgrowth of social capital. A staff member explained that the Memorial Fund’s new strategic plan “is organized very much around strategies and actions and not as much around organizations....So I think just in the way we’ve engaged in this process we’re seeing the linkages a little bit more, and everybody being involved in each of those strategies and actions” (Int4). This emphasis on strategies rather than organizational hubs places primacy on connections *among* individuals and organizations rather than the people and organizations themselves, thus bolstering networks and potentially increasing social capital. The benefits will not depend on individuals. The value added here is that with an increase in social capital, social change will happen more readily, will be initiated, pursued, and shared among more people, and change will be sustained over time.

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