Trust and Cooperation in Schools:

Foundations for Learning

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**Introduction**

Trust and cooperation in schools is the foundation upon which success is built. Previous research has suggested that social relationships found within school environments are key to schools’ successful functioning, particularly in high-stakes environments (Bryk and Schneider 2002). Our study is a largely descriptive study replicating the findings of Bryk and Schneider. We utilized a sample of high-achieving and low-achieving elementary schools in Florida for the purposes of this project; and our focus was to assess the differences in "trust" between these elementary schools. Our participants were teachers from a sample of high poverty (over 75% Free/Reduced Lunch) schools in Florida that were from either high or low performing schools, whose students have either high (over 10%) or low proportions of Limited English Proficiency. Thus, we focused our attention on schools overcoming large obstacles to high achievement, including a high concentration of socioeconomically disadvantaged youth.

**Literature Review**

Throughout their important work, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*, Bryk and Schneider point out the extent to which relational trust in schools is an undervalued and understudied topic. And indeed this appears to be the case. Among a slew of studies attempting to explain how and why some schools succeed in teaching children, particularly high-risk children, social relations within the school is a neglected topic.

Research is limited and a majority of the work on this topic has been published in fields outside of sociology. The studies exploring the topic have focused their investigations on the relative success of urban Catholic schools and their plight to educate
at-risk youngsters. In describing successful middle schools in New York City, Deborah Meier (1995) notes the importance of social relations in successful schools. Other reports only mention the importance of social relations, while few have actually examined the consequences of positive or negative social relations in schools.

School settings are characterized by multiple sets of social relations that are important for student achievement. These sets of social relations include the relationships between teachers and parents; teachers and teachers; and teachers and principals. In each set of social relations, there is an understanding of the obligations attached to one’s role, along with certain expectations from others holding a different role. Bryk and Schneider state that trust in social relations “requires synchrony in these mutual expectations and obligations” (20). In other words, expectations from one party must ‘jibe’ with the other party’s understanding of obligations. Schools will function well when a degree of synchrony is achieved, or when there is mutual trust among parties that everyone is fulfilling their obligations.

Of course, the degree to which other parties or actors share the same understanding of role obligations is difficult for any party or actor to discern. Thus, in the course of day-to-day interactions, observation is used to determine how well others are fulfilling role obligations. These trust relations have organizational consequences which include enhanced and more efficient decision making and better delivery of instruction. Since the social relationships found in schools are complex, it is necessary to examine each set in detail.
**Parent-Teacher Trust**

First, in order for students to achieve consistently at high levels, parents and teachers must work together to promote the educational goals of the schools. For years educators have stressed the need to establish a parent-teacher partnership if students are to reach higher levels of academic achievement; and countless studies has supported this belief. After analyzing school partnership programs, Epstein (2003) found an important link between schools’ improving the communication between families and educators and an increase in student performance on state achievement test in Maryland (Epstein 2003).

Parents must trust teachers to some extent because they are handing over responsibility for their child and their child’s education while school is in session. When parents see the teachers as antagonistic and/or teachers see the parents as inhibiting the students’ academic progress, little benefit comes to the student (Epstein and Sanders 2000; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). In fact, parents and teachers may then suffer an inability to communicate effectively about barriers to student achievement, while small issues that may have otherwise been solved easily may turn into larger issues.

**Teacher-Teacher Trust**

Furthermore, in order to further a positive and productive working environment, teachers must be able to trust other teachers. In a highly successful program developed in 1986, *The Accelerated Schools Project* (ASP) brought underachieving schools to the same level of attainment as their “gifted and talented” counterparts: in hundreds of ASP classrooms nationwide there was an increase in student performance across all subject areas (The Accelerated School Program, 2004). An essential aspect of the program was a shared teaching philosophy which stressed: developing school goals, building a powerful community based on commitment, and promoting an atmosphere of cooperation and trust.
among staff (McMeekin, 2003). This philosophy forced a strong alliance among participating teachers, who later reported the program resulted in their professional growth and more importantly an increased communication and sharing among colleagues. Upon examining ASP schools, a by-product of the program was a greater feeling of support from peers, camaraderie, and accountability among the staff to provide a better education for all students (McMeekin, 2003). In commenting on the importance of establishing relationship of trust among teachers, Bryk reported that teachers expressed feeling less vulnerable and more inclined to attempt new educational approaches in schools where a high level of trust was established. Teachers also promoted internal accountability and a shared attachment to their school and its mission (Johnston, 2004).

As much as social trust contributes to the efficient functioning of national economies (Fukuyama 1995), positive social relations and social trust in schools can “grease the wheels” of school success. An essential component of creating a professional community is the development of a network of trust and obligation among teachers. Research indicates that developing a strong network begins by providing opportunities for teachers to influence school activities and polices, creating norms of collegiality and opportunities for reflection and collaboration, and deinstitutionalizing teaching practices (Halverson, 2003). In schools exhibiting such practices, some of the highest levels of academic success can be found. In order for a coherent school success plan to emerge and be implemented, teachers must trust one another to do their jobs well (Louis and Kruse 1995; Bryk, Camburn, and Louis 1999).

**Principal-Teacher Trust**

Establishing a strong administration in schools is vital to ensure students have an equal opportunity to be successful. An effective principal is accountable for creating a
collective sense of responsibility for school improvement. Strong efforts to involve everyone as key components in creating an environment conducive to academic achievement must be taken. For such ends to be met, teachers and principals must trust one another. A study by the Charles A. Dana Center (1999) analyzed nine high performing, high poverty urban schools and found key components to their success were the multidimensional approaches used by their principals. All nine schools used some form of the following strategies: 1) leaders appealed to teachers, support staff, and parents to put aside their self-interests and focus on serving children; 2) principals increased their time spent on important issues, such as helping teachers attend to instructional issues and decreased the time spent on distractions diverting attention away from teaching and learning; 3) principals placed educators in positions of instructional leadership, which challenged teachers and students to higher levels of academic attainment; and 4) school leaders made certain teachers had adequate materials, equipment, and professional development.

As Bryk and Schneider point out, “the aims of schooling are multiple, and the mechanisms for addressing them are complex, diffuse, and not simply specified” (20). In these circumstances, good communication and high levels of trust among teachers and principals are important because the operation and success of the school “depends heavily on the cooperative efforts around local problem solving” (20). Other work settings where there is more routinized and rationalized methods of production do not face similar problems in developing trust compared to those not establishing these characteristics. Schools, however, have multiple goals and continuously changing scenarios that demand nimble reactions from teachers and principals which present unique challenges in their plight in establishing trust in their various social relations.
**Hypotheses**

Given the nature of our study, our hypotheses are descriptive in nature.

1. Elementary schools with higher levels of achievement will also be characterized by higher levels of teacher-parent trust.

2. Elementary schools with higher levels of achievement will also be characterized by higher levels of teacher-teacher trust.

3. Elementary schools with higher levels of achievement will also be characterized by higher levels of teacher-principal trust.

**Measurement and Methods of Analysis**

Participant schools were sampled from an overall list of Florida elementary schools identified as having a high percentage of students on free/reduced lunch. We defined “high percentage” as those schools with 75 percent or more of the student body population receiving free/reduced lunch. Once we identified the population, we took a random sample of schools from each of the four categories described below, thus employing a stratified random sampling technique. We sampled schools with a high or low percentage of LEP students (defined as >10% or <10%) and with either a high or low level of achievement (n=252). High-achieving schools received a score of “A” or “B” on the 2002 FCAT, while low-achieving schools received a score of “D” or “F” on the 2002 FCAT.

We selected 24 schools from each of the following four categories: high-achieving, high-LEP; high-achieving, low-LEP; low-achieving, high-LEP, and low-achieving, low-LEP. Once selected, school principals were contacted via postal mail and telephone to solicit participation by the institution, which yielded the following results: five high achieving-high LEP schools; six high-achieving, low-LEP schools; eight low-
achieving, high-LEP schools, and seven low-achieving, low-LEP schools pledged their participation producing a total sample size of 26 schools.

Upon agreeing to participate, the Florida Center staff provided the school with survey instruments and stamped return envelopes for each classroom teacher in the school. Teachers completed the survey at their convenience and returned the survey directly to The Florida Center. Personal identifiers were not used on the survey; however each survey was coded with a sequential serial number for tracking purposes. Institution-based incentives were used (a gift certificate to an education-oriented supply firm) to encourage participation by both schools and teachers. Incentives were provided for schools meeting a 50 percent threshold for survey completion. These schools were identified (for the 50% completion rate) by tracking the serial numbers on the surveys sent to each participating school.

We operationalized the concepts of trust between the various social relations by using a variety of questions. The questions used to operationalize teacher-parent trust are listed below:

**Teacher-Parent Trust**

1. How many of your students’ parents do their best to help their children learn?^{[1]}
2. How many teachers at this school feel good about parents’ support for their work?^{[b]}
3. How many teachers at this school really care about this local community?^{[b]}
4. How many of your students’ parents support your teaching efforts?^{[b]}
5. Teachers and parents think of each other as partners in educating children.^{[a]}
6. At this school, it is difficult to overcome the cultural barriers between teachers and parents.^{[a]}
7. Parents have confidence in the expertise of the teachers.^{[a]}
8. There is conflict between parents and teachers at this school.^{[a]}
9. Staff at this school work hard to build trusting relationships with parents.^{[a]}
10. Talking with parents helps me understand my students better.^{[a]}
11. To what extent do teachers in this school respect parents and community members of the local community?^{[c]}


Teacher-Parent Trust Continued.

12. To what extent do teachers in this school respect students’ parents? c
13. To what extent do you feel respected by the parents of your students? c

The questions ask to operationalize teacher-teacher trust are listed below:

Teacher-Teacher Trust
1. How many teachers in this school really care about each other? b
2. Teachers in this school trust each other. a
3. It’s OK in this school to discuss feelings, worries, and frustrations with other teachers. a
4. Teachers respect other teachers who take the lead in school improvement efforts. a
5. Teachers at this school respect those colleagues who are expert at their craft. a
6. To what extent do you feel respected by other teachers? c

The questions used to operationalize teacher-principal trust are listed below:

Teacher-Principal Trust
1. It’s OK in this school to discuss feelings, worries, and frustrations with the principal. a
2. The principal looks out for the personal welfare of the faculty members. a
3. I trust the principal at his or her word. a
4. The principal at this school is an effective manager who makes the school run smoothly. a
5. The principal places the needs of children ahead of her personal and political interests. a
6. The principal has confidence in the expertise of the teachers. a
7. The principal takes a personal interest in the professional development of teachers. a
8. I really respect my principal as an educator. a
9. To what extent do you feel respected by your principal? c

In addition, we have included a copy of the survey instrument.

From these questions, we ran factor analyses with promax rotation to create single factor measures of teacher-parent, teacher-teacher, and teacher-principal trust. These measures are interval/ratio measures. We then aggregated the teachers’ responses to create school-level variables of teacher-teacher, teacher-parent, and teacher-principal
trust. We also created variables measuring the standard deviations of these trust
measures within the school.

We then compare the high-achieving and low-achieving schools in an effort to
discern whether social trust is a resource on which schools are differentially able to
draw. Our analyses are based on a very small sample size, and thus we must be cautious
when attempting to draw general conclusions. However, our results do not seem to
support the assertion that high-achieving schools are able to draw on high levels of trust
in the various relationships than low-achieving schools. For example, Table 1 reveals no
significant relationship between trust in schools and their achievement status.

Table 1: Mean Levels and Standard Deviations of Teacher-Principal, Teacher-
Teacher, and Teacher-Parent Trust in Selected High and Low-Achieving
Elementary Schools in Florida

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Teacher-Principal Trust</th>
<th>Teacher-Teacher Trust</th>
<th>Teacher-Parent Trust</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low-Achieving Schools</td>
<td>.94 (.35)</td>
<td>.89 (.26)</td>
<td>.95 (.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Achieving Schools</td>
<td>.80 (.15)</td>
<td>.90 (.22)</td>
<td>.93 (.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.88 (.29)</td>
<td>.90 (.24)</td>
<td>.94 (.20)</td>
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The factor scores show no significant variation by school achievement levels. We
also tested whether there were significant variations among our four categories of schools
(high LEP, high achieving vs. low LEP, high achieving, etc.) and found no significant
results.

In addition, our analysis including running correlations and scattergrams to
examine the existence of interrelationships among the trust variables, student
achievement, and school sociodemographic and neighborhood characteristics. We
analyzed the corresponding math and reading achievement scores at the third, fourth, and
fifth grade levels. As the tables and charts shown below indicate, the only significant relationships between the trust variables and student achievement work in direct opposition to the predicted direction. At the third grade level, teacher-principal and teacher-teacher trust are negatively related to student math and reading achievement, measured as the percentage of third graders who earned a score of ‘3’ or above on the FCAT exam. The scattergrams of these relationships are shown below:
Furthermore, the results of the cross-tabulations show (see Appendix 1), none of the trust variables are significantly related to the school and neighborhood demographic variables. These variables are constant across grades: thus, we do not discuss them at any length below.

At the fourth-grade level, teacher-principal and teacher-teacher trust are negatively related to reading achievement.
At the fifth grade level, none of the predictor variables are significantly related to student achievement. These results indicate that none of the trust variables are related to one another.
Conclusions

Our results do not support our hypotheses that trust and general greater levels of cooperation-trust will be associated with higher levels of achievement in Florida’s most disadvantaged elementary schools. This is in direct contradiction to Bryk and Schneider’s findings about trust and cooperation in Chicago’s elementary schools. Reasons for these differences may be due to several factors: first, our sample size is extremely small. It is exceedingly difficult to make valid comparisons of cells sizes when working with a small sample size. In the future, more research should be conducted on trust relations in schools when the issues associated with a sample size can be overcome. Second, we are working with an extremely disadvantaged population of schools. The schools in our sample have a student body of more than 75 percent qualifying for free and reduced lunch. While schools are able to high levels of academic achievement as seen through their FCAT scores, many other schools are not. Our results seem to suggest, whatever resources high-achieving schools are able to draw upon to ensure student achievement, high levels of teacher-principal, teacher-teacher, and teacher-parent trust are not among them. In any event, the resources found within such schools are not disproportionately present in high-achieving schools vs. low-achieving schools.
Appendix 1: Correlation Coefficients among Trust, Achievement, and Sociodemographic Variables

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Teacher-principal trust</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>-.514*</td>
<td>-.570*</td>
<td>-.443*</td>
<td>-.313</td>
<td>-.234</td>
<td>-.286</td>
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<td>(2) Teacher-teacher trust</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>-.553*</td>
<td>-.656*</td>
<td>-.389*</td>
<td>-.257</td>
<td>-.352</td>
<td>-.301</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) Teacher-parent trust</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>-.155</td>
<td>-.097</td>
<td>-.169</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>-.019</td>
<td>.051</td>
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<td>(4) % LEP</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>-.298</td>
<td>-.344</td>
<td>-.134</td>
<td>-.253</td>
<td>-.030</td>
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<td>(5) % F/R Lunch</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.729*</td>
<td>-.711*</td>
<td>-.710*</td>
<td>-.694*</td>
<td>-.713*</td>
<td>-.594*</td>
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<td>(6) 3rd grade reading</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>(7) 3rd grade math</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>(8) 4th grade reading</td>
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<td>(9) 4th grade math</td>
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<td>(10) 5th grade reading</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>(11) 5th grade math</td>
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[1] Response categories for the questions are as follows:


[3] Five-point scale: none, some, about half, most, nearly all.

[4] Four-point scale: not at all, a little, some, to a great extent.

[5] This factor score had a Cronbach’s alpha of .745.

[6] This factor score had a Cronbach’s alpha of .878.

[7] This factor score has a Cronbach’s alpha of .943
References


Business Web site:


