Trust and the Family–School Relationship
Examination of Parent–Teacher Differences in Elementary and Secondary Grades

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Trust between parents and teachers is a vital element in building and maintaining the family–school relationship. Parents (n = 1,234) and teachers (n = 209) from a first-ring suburban school district were surveyed about issues of trust in the family–school relationship. Results indicated higher levels of parent trust and teacher trust at the elementary level than at middle or high school levels. Additionally, differences in trust levels between teachers and parents at elementary and high school levels were found, with parent trust being significantly higher. Improving home–school communication was identified as a primary way to enhance trust. Also, the perceived quality of family–school interaction was a better predictor of trust than was the frequency of contact or demographic variables. Trust was positively correlated with three indicators of school performance. Implications for school personnel to make more systematic efforts toward building trust between parents and teachers throughout a child’s academic career are discussed. © 2000 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd

Keywords: Trust, Family–school relationship, Home–school collaboration, Home–school partnership, Elementary school, Secondary school.

Schools have always relied on the input of parents in the process of educating and socializing children. However, the alliance between home and school has changed dramatically throughout the history of formal education, as have the roles and functions that parents and teachers are expected to fulfill. According to Gareau and Sawatzky (1995), a sense of common culture between families and educators existed prior to the 1940s because schools were viewed as “natural extensions of the community” (p. 464). The close relationship between families and schools has been “lost” and/or replaced by an adversarial tone in the past 40 years. Technological and cultural changes paired with the professionalization of teaching after World War II resulted in less agreement between home and school (Berger, 1991). The idea that children live in two different worlds, represented by
cultural discontinuity, began to develop. In recent years, a shift from relatively separate responsibilities of family and school on students’ development and learning toward a partnership approach (i.e., shared responsibilities) has been advanced as a means to address children’s complex needs. There is little dispute that schools and families share the common task of educating and socializing children and youth (Coleman, 1987; Pianta & Walsh, 1996); however, the roles of the two systems are debated. Lightfoot (1978) argued that these two entities are frequently and inherently embroiled in conflict due to the roles each plays in society as well as differences inherent in parent–child and teacher–child relationships. She believed that “dissonance between family and school...is not only inevitable in a changing society; it also helps to make children more malleable and responsive to a changing world” (Lightfoot, 1978, p. 39).

On the other hand, Conoley (1987) argued that families and schools are not as dissimilar as previous thinking has suggested. Rather, perceived dissimilarities are differences of degree, not substance. Both schools and families engage in the process of socializing children through support, teaching, nurturing, punishment, rewards, and evaluation; each strive to maintain a fragile equilibrium within the values, beliefs, cultural mores, and societal expectations of a particular society. By proposing that educational experts (teachers and administrators) and educational nonexperts (parents, siblings, and community members) have unique, yet complementary, contributions to make, Litwak and Meyer (1974) offered a more balanced perspective. In their conceptualization, school personnel were responsible for the formal educational opportunities and families were responsible for the informal learning and motivation-to-learn tasks. Failure to provide experiences in both realms was proposed to lead to a disintegration of the process of successfully raising and educating children. More recently, Bronfenbrenner (1991) suggested that families provide the informal education that is an essential prerequisite to children’s success in formal educational settings.

In the best of all possible worlds, the family–school relationship would be based not only on two-way communication, cooperation, and coordination, but also on collaboration. Shared understanding and goals are at the forefront of Vosler-Hunter’s view of collaboration between parents and teachers. Within a collaborative relationship, parents and teachers “share joint responsibilities and rights, are seen as equals, and can jointly contribute to the process” (Vosler-Hunter, 1989, p. 15). His ideal was translated into five often-quoted key elements of collaboration identified by teachers and parents of children with emotional and behavioral disabilities: mutual respect for skills and knowledge, honest and clear communication, open and two-way sharing of information, mutually agreed-upon goals, and shared planning and decision making.
Trust between families and school is implicit in these elements of collaboration; in fact, we contend these elements are predicated on trust between the partners. Furthermore, both parents and professionals identified trust as a vital component of effective family–school relationships (Dunst, Johnson, Rounds, Trivette, & Hamby, 1992). Surprisingly, however, there is a dearth of research addressing trust in the family–school relationship. Resources that provide guidance to educators interested in building trust with parents are available (e.g., Margolis & Brannigan, 1986); however, studies that have investigated the effects and significance of trust between families and school personnel are rare in the educational research literature. There appears to be much talk and relatively little investigation of a variable deemed integral to building a positive connection between families and schools to address children’s learning and development.

This descriptive study aimed to add to our knowledge about trust between parents and teachers by investigating these specific questions: (a) Are there differences in trust between parents and teachers and across grade levels? (b) What do parents and teachers report as important contributors to trust? (c) Are levels of trust mediated by the amount and nature of the contact with the school, or parent and child demographic variables? and (d) Is parental trust level related to indicators of student performance? Many terms are used interchangeably throughout the literature to describe the relationship between home and school. Although we recognize that the linchpin of this relationship is what occurs between a parent and a teacher, this study was not conducted at the dyadic level due to concerns raised by the participating school district. Rather, teachers and parents responded to items representing generalized relationship experiences. Therefore, to adequately represent the focus of the current study, the more inclusive term, family–school relationship, is used.

DEFINITION OF TRUST

Despite its common usage, trust has been a difficult concept to adequately define, particularly for research purposes. Rotter (1980) defined trust as “a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word, promise, or statement of another individual can be relied upon” (p. 651). Deutsch (1973) took a broader, more general perspective, defining trust as “confidence that one will find what is desired from another, rather than what is feared” (p. 148). Adding to this definition, Scanzoni (1979) introduced the idea that an individual must be placed in a position of risk to trust; therefore, the likelihood that trust would be present in new relationships is low because of the limited interaction upon which to justify taking a risk. Finally, Holmes and Rempel (1989) viewed trust in interpersonal relationships as “reflecting confident expectations of positive outcomes” (p. 188).
Most definitions of trust come from an examination of close interpersonal relationships. Although obvious and pervasive differences exist between these relationships and family-school relationships, exploring this literature provided a theoretical base from which to consider issues of trust between parents and teachers. Based on the work of Holmes and Rempel (1989), we define trust in the family-school relationship as confidence that another person will act in a way to benefit or sustain the relationship, or the implicit or explicit goals of the relationship, to achieve positive outcomes for students (Adams & Christenson, 1998). An effective family-school relationship emphasizes the interface of two systems by recognizing that the goal of the relationship is to create and sustain a strong connection between varied partners (e.g., parents, teachers, support personnel, principal) to address the ongoing needs of students; not merely a “one-shot” meeting to resolve the presenting concern (Weiss & Edwards, 1992).

**DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION OF TRUST**

Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) hypothesized that trust consisted of three progressing levels arranged in a hierarchical order—predictability, dependability, and faith—and that interactions within relationships tended to be characterized by a single level. Later, Holmes and Rempel (1989) referred to this developmental progression as uncertainty reduction. The first most basic foundational stage of trust is that of predictability, which refers to reliability of behavior and stability of the emotional environment. At this level, trust is established from specific behavioral evidence, wherein individuals repeatedly behave in the manner expected. Sharing knowledge of relevant behavioral constraints for expected parent or teacher behaviors encourages predictability. As the relationship progresses toward dependability, trust is seen as a personal attribute. The shift from a focus on concrete behaviors (i.e., “I trust them because they did X, Y, and Z”) toward a focus on personal qualities (i.e., “They are trustworthy people”) occurs after individuals demonstrate their behavior is predictable and responsive to another’s needs. The final level of trust is faith, which reflects an emotional security that is not solely rooted in past experiences; it goes beyond the available evidence or dispositional attributes. Despite uncertainty, individuals in the relationship are certain that their partner will follow through and be responsive to their needs. Rempel and colleagues contend that “although we do not consider these components to be mutually exclusive, we do believe that the dominance of one perspective over another has very different implications for the quality of the relationship” (Rempel et al., 1985, p.98).

In a study of the appraisal process of 82 established couples, Holmes and Rempel (1989) demonstrated that level of trust influences attributions
about the caring and responsiveness of others. Within high-trust relationships, individuals interpreted the behavior of others in a positive light; negative behaviors were deemed to be less important than the longer list of positive characteristics. Also, attributions for negative behavior were made to alternate less threatening explanations, thus limiting the negative implications for the relationship. Additionally, high-trust relationships appeared to take a long-term perspective that ultimately stabilized perceptions of behavior. Trusting and nontrusting behaviors were thought of as averaging out over the long run, and little concern over short-run inequities existed.

In contrast, medium-trust relationships were characterized by a defensive posture where positive behavior was interpreted as situation specific; therefore, the trustworthiness of partners was uncertain and subject to active scrutiny. Overall, individuals were more attentive and willing to interpret negative behavior as a sign of deeper concerns (i.e., character flaws). Individuals in low-trust relationships expected negative behavior from their partners and little interaction in the relationship. As a result, they controlled the interactions, taking out what the authors described as “security insurance” to get their needs met.

Although these patterns of interaction were based on close relationships between intimate partners, the applicability to the family–school relationship seems evident. Due to limited amounts of contact in the family–school relationship, trust may often remain stalled at the lowest level, predictability. When this happens, parents and teachers continually search for behaviors as evidence of the other person being trustworthy. For example, consider the following scenario: A seventh-grade student begins a new junior high school. This student gets into a verbal disagreement with a teacher regarding a missing assignment. This disagreement escalates into a situation in which the student is suspended from school. At the re-entry conference, parents and teachers, who have not met each other prior to this conference, are searching for indicators that the other partner is worthy of their trust. However, in the emotionally charged environment of a suspension re-entry meeting, the parties engage in blaming each other for the suspension. The parent feels the teacher was being too harsh and mistreated the student, whereas the teacher feels the parent is merely coddling the student and that the student was insubordinate, which is a clearly defined infraction deserving a suspension. In this scenario, prior contact between the parties in a positive or emotionally neutral environment could have built trust and understanding. Previous positive interactions may have carried the parent and teacher beyond the immediate tension of the re-entry conference to a more effective resolution of the issue in question.

A failure to use personal attributes makes trust in the relationship extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in behavior by either the teacher or parent. One false step can move a potentially trusting relationship in the
wrong direction. Holmes and Rempel (1989) warn that once there is a significant breach of the trust relationship, the relationship is at serious risk of failing. Also, family–school interactions repeated over time take on relational patterns, in which a “common knowledge” about family–school interactions emerges (Power & Bartholomew, 1987). This stereotypic behavior often becomes a prototype for the nature of the on-going interactions between home and school. As with close interpersonal relationships, in high-trust family–school relationships, more positive attributions may be made about the other partner. Moderate-trust relationships may underrecognize positive behaviors while overemphasizing negative behaviors.

Also relevant for the family–school relationship is the work of Swinth (1967) who, through the Prisoner’s Dilemma game, asserted that trust was built in two steps. In the initial step, one must take an ambiguous path that exposes oneself to the risk of personal loss. Following the initial exposure to risk, the partner must choose an alternative that relinquishes personal gain, such that the first person does not experience the loss. Swinth (1967) concluded that

whether it be in interpersonal relations or international relations, the participants cannot be expected to ever trust each other in critical moments if these constitute their only opportunity to interact. They need a period in which they can carry out the coordinating process of exposure and acceptance (p. 343).

In the traditional school environment, this caution is violated all too frequently. Typically, the only time parents have contact with the school is in crisis situations such as when the student has violated school regulations. A crisis management view of parental input creates a situation in which trust between school personnel and parents is vital to the success of the meeting. However, with no previous contact, which is theorized as necessary to signal trusting intentions, these situations often lead to nontrusting interactions and, subsequently, nonoptimal results for the student. A previous time in which to signal trusting intentions is considered an essential prerequisite for handling critical issues for students.

**EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FOR TRUST**

Research on current levels of trust between families and schools is scarce. In a survey of human service practitioners and administrators in early intervention and parents of children with special needs, Dunst et al. (1992) found that trust was one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of positive parent–professional partnerships. It was mentioned by 45% of parents and 55% of practitioners; other characteristics included the elements of collaboration (e.g., honest and open communication).

In a precursor to the current study, Adams and Christenson (1998) directly examined relative levels of trust between parents and teachers, as
measured by a previous version of the Trust scale. One hundred thirty-two parents and 152 teachers of middle school students in an urban setting in regular and special education were surveyed. Results indicated that parent trust for teachers was higher than teacher trust for parents ($t = -9.19, p < .01$). Results also revealed no differences in parent trust as a function of income, ethnicity, or type of educational service (regular education vs. special education). Significant differences in parent trust were found to exist between school sites and for parents of students receiving varying levels of special education, with parents of students receiving more intensive special education services displaying significantly higher levels of trust. These differences were hypothesized to be related to school climate issues and opportunities for family-school interaction. When parents were categorized as low, moderate, or high trust, significant differences emerged between these groups in attitudes and behaviors related to parent involvement. Parents who reported low or moderate levels of trust had significantly less positive attitudes toward and less frequent engagement in parent involvement activities than parents reporting high levels of trust.

Trust in the family-school relationship is a construct worthy of examination because it (a) is considered the first step in creating collaborative relationships between families and schools for children’s learning and development, (b) is different for parents and teachers of students at the middle school level, (c) appears to influence parents’ attitudes toward and behaviors related to participation in their child’s education, and (d) may too often be stalled at the predictability level for families and schools.

**METHODS**

**Participants**

Participants were 1,234 parents and 209 teachers from a first-ring suburban school district in a large Midwestern metropolitan area. The district is comprised of six schools, accounting for its 303 teachers, 2,843 families, and 4,061 students. In the district overall, 23% of students received free or reduced lunch; approximately 25% of students in the district were children of color; 75% identified their ethnicity as Caucasian.

Parents of students enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade were recruited to complete surveys. Permission was secured at the district level to survey all parents. This allowed the use of a negative consent form, asking parents to return the form only if they chose not to participate. Only one such reply was received. Demographic characteristics were highly similar across grade levels for the 1,234 parents returning surveys (43%). Most parents reported their ethnicity as Caucasian; only 13% identified themselves as persons of color. Greater than 80% of surveys were completed by women. Over 95% of parents held a high school diploma or higher; nearly 70% had completed some type of postsecondary education.
The 303 teachers employed in the district were recruited to complete surveys. Surveys were completed by 209 teachers (69%). Nearly all teachers identified themselves as Caucasian (97.6%) and 65% were women. The gender discrepancy was most prevalent in elementary settings; by secondary levels, the gender split was close to 50-50. Slightly over 33% of teachers held a bachelor’s degree only; slightly over 50% held a master’s degree, and close to 10% held other advanced degrees.

**Measures**

Parents and teachers completed parallel forms of the Family–School Relationship Survey, consisting of the following scales: Trust, Frequency and Nature of Parent-Teacher Interaction, Recommendations for Improving Trust, and Demographic Variables. Based theoretically on the measurement of trust in close interpersonal relationships (Holmes & Rempel, 1989), teachers and parents rated, respectively, 17 to 19 items that began with the sentence stem “I am confident that teachers” or “I am confident that parents/guardians” (see Table 1) followed by different statements that reflected a variety of behaviors often performed by parents or teachers to enhance students’ school performance. These statements were developed from a review of the literature in effective family–school relationships as well as through informal interviews with parents and teachers.

Items were added to the original Trust scale (Adams & Christenson, 1998) to reflect a broader sample of behaviors related to levels of trust: predictability, dependability, and faith. Trust items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale that represented the level of confidence the respondent had that certain behaviors beneficial to the goal of the family–school relationship (e.g., student academic success) were being performed by the parents or teachers. Respondent choices were 0 (Strongly disagree), 1 (Disagree), 2 (Agree), and 3 (Strongly agree). All Trust scale items were stated in the positive to simplify readability. The number of items was small, reducing the influence of a positive response set. Additionally, stating items in the positive was necessary given the definition of trust driving the current study, which is clearly predicated on what is happening in the relationship as opposed to what is not happening. Reliability for the Trust scale, as measured by the alpha coefficient, was .90 for teachers and .96 for parents.

Two process variables, frequency and nature of parent–teacher interaction, were examined by asking parents and teachers to rate on a 4-point scale the frequency of and satisfaction with contact between the two partners. In response to the statements “I have contact with teachers/parents of my child/students,” parents and teachers were asked to select either 3 (Very frequent), 2 (Somewhat frequently, but less than I’d like), 1 (Somewhat frequently, the bare minimum), or 0 (Very infrequently). In response to the state-
Table 1
Trust Scale From the Family–School Relationship Survey

Parent/guardian form
I am confident that teachers:
- are doing a good job teaching my child academic subjects
- are doing a good job teaching my child to follow rules and directions
- are doing a good job helping my child resolve conflicts with peers
- are doing a good job keeping me well-informed of my child’s progress
- are doing a good job encouraging my participation in my child’s education
- are doing a good job disciplining my child
- are easy to reach when I have a problem or question
- keep me aware of all the information I need related to school
- are doing a good job encouraging my child’s sense of self-esteem
- are doing a good job encouraging my child to have a positive attitude toward learning
- are doing a good job helping my child understand his/her moral and ethical responsibilities
- are friendly and approachable
- are receptive to my input and suggestions
- are sensitive to cultural differences
- respect me as a competent parent
- care about my child
- have my child’s best interests at heart
- are worthy of my respect
- will do what is best for my child in the classroom

Teacher form
I am confident that parents/guardians:
- are doing a good job teaching their child academic subjects at home
- are doing a good job teaching their child to follow rules and directions
- are doing a good job helping their child resolve conflicts with peers
- are doing a good job participating in their child’s education
- are doing a good job disciplining their child
- are easy to reach when I have a question or problem
- make me aware of all the information I need about their child
- are doing a good job encouraging their child’s sense of self-esteem
- are doing a good job encouraging their child to have a positive attitude toward learning
- are doing a good job helping their child understand his/her moral and ethical responsibilities
- are friendly and approachable
- are receptive to my input and suggestions
- are sensitive to cultural differences
- respect me as a competent teacher
- are clearly committed to their child’s education
- are worthy of my respect
- have their child’s best interests at heart

ments “I find the relationship with my child’s/students’ teachers/parents,” parents and teachers were asked to select either 3 (Very satisfying, it is easy for me to work with teachers/parents), 2 (Somewhat satisfying, it’s OK), 1 (Somewhat unsatisfying, could definitely be improved), or 0 (Very unsatisfying, it is difficult for me to work with teachers/parents).
To assess recommendations for improving trust in the family–school relationship, one open-ended direct question was asked. Parents were asked “What is one thing teachers could do to increase your trust in them concerning your child?” Teachers were asked “What is one thing parents could do to increase your trust in them concerning their child?”

Data were drawn from the district database for type of educational programming (special education/regular education), student demographic information (i.e., status variables), and student achievement information. Attendance (number of days present divided by number of days enrolled) in the school year, grade-point average (GPA; high school only), credits earned (high school only), and standardized test scores (Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8) were garnered from the district database for each student. Standardized achievement test scores, as measured by the Iowa Basic Tests (Hieronymus, Hoover, & Lindquist, 1986), were not available for other grade levels.

**Procedures**

Parent data were collected for students enrolled in Grades K–12. Parents with more than one child attending school within the district were asked to complete only one survey, which was sent home with the youngest child. Parents of elementary school students were asked to complete the survey and return it in a sealed envelope; teachers collected these envelopes and deposited them in a box in the school’s main office. Parents also had the option of mailing the survey directly to the researchers; however, by choosing this option, they were required to supply the postage. To increase the probability of surveys reaching certain parents, surveys were mailed home for families whose youngest child was either in junior high or high school. For these families, the survey was accompanied by a cover letter as well as a self-addressed stamped envelope for survey return.

Surveys were coded for each family for the purpose of follow-up communication. Parents were given two weeks to complete and return the survey. Telephone surveys were then conducted with a random sample of 200 parents who did not respond to the survey within 2 weeks. Of these parents, approximately 22% completed the survey by telephone. As an incentive for participation, a drawing for a gift certificate from a local business was held for parents who completed and returned the survey or responded by telephone interview.

Teachers were surveyed during a monthly staff meeting. Surveys were distributed, completed, and collected for those interested in participating during this meeting. All teachers present at the monthly staff meeting completed surveys; the 69% return rate reflected absences during this meeting.

**RESULTS**

A significance level of alpha equal to .05 was adopted for all statistical analyses.
Within- and Between-Group Differences

Relative levels of parent trust for teachers and teacher trust for parents were examined within three grade-level categories: elementary (Grades K–6), junior high (Grades 7–8), and high school (Grades 9–12). As displayed in Figure 1, a decline in levels of trust for parents and teachers across the grade levels emerged. For parents, trust was highest at the elementary level ($M = 2.14, SD = .41$), clearly declining at the junior high level ($M = 1.75, SD = .46$), and declining only slightly at the high school level ($M = 1.68, SD = .46$). For teachers, trust remained fairly steady across grade levels (elementary: $M = 1.72, SD = .42$; junior high: $M = 1.63, SD = .25$; high school: $M = 1.52, SD = .30$).

One-way analyses of variance were conducted to examine within-group differences for parents and teachers as a function of grade level. Significant differences in trust for elementary, junior high, and high school parents were found ($F = 121.97, p = .00$). Follow-up tests using Tukey’s B indicated that differences emerged in parent trust between elementary and junior high ($t = 9.53, p = .00$) and between elementary and high school ($t = 13.73, p = .00$), with higher trust demonstrated by parents at the elementary level in each case. No other pairwise comparisons were significant.

Significant trust differences also existed for teachers as a function of grade level ($F = 5.44, p = .01$). Follow-up tests using Tukey’s B revealed a significant difference in trust between elementary and high school levels ($t = 3.26, p = .00$), with higher trust at the elementary level. No other pairwise comparisons were significant.
Table 2
Frequency and Satisfaction With Relationship by Grade Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Junior High</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent mean (SD)</td>
<td>2.44 (0.69)</td>
<td>2.62 (0.57)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.78)</td>
<td>1.96 (0.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher mean (SD)</td>
<td>2.33 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.33 (0.68)</td>
<td>2.38 (0.60)</td>
<td>2.31 (0.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent mean (SD)</td>
<td>1.89 (0.93)</td>
<td>2.12 (0.83)</td>
<td>1.35 (0.91)</td>
<td>1.27 (0.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher mean (SD)</td>
<td>2.03 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.13 (0.72)</td>
<td>2.11 (0.76)</td>
<td>1.75 (0.86)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Frequency of interaction was rated on a 4-point scale where 3 = Very frequent and 0 = Very infrequent. Satisfaction with interaction was rated on a 4-point scale where 3 = Very satisfying and 0 = Very unsatisfying.

Relative levels of trust between parents and teachers at each grade level (see Figure 1) were examined through *t*-tests of independent means. Significant differences emerged between parents and teachers at elementary school (*t* = 10.7, *p* = .00) and high school levels (*t* = 2.43, *p* = .00), whereas differences between parents and teachers at the junior high school level approached significance (*t* = 1.49, *p* = .07).

Predictors of Trust

Separate multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the influence of a series of process and status variables in predicting total trust for parents and teachers. The process variables were frequency of interaction and satisfaction with interaction; the other variables were considered status variables. As reflected in Table 2, teacher satisfaction with parental interactions across grade levels was consistently rated, on average, as “OK and somewhat satisfying.” Parent satisfaction with teacher interactions and parent and teacher ratings of frequency of interaction gradually declined across grade-level categories. Frequency of and satisfaction with the relationship were significantly correlated; however, the correlation was moderate for parents (*r* = .48, *p* < .01) and low for teachers (*r* = .19, *p* < .01).

Parent trust. As this research was exploratory in nature, a broad range of variables were included in these analyses. For parent data, the variables entered into the stepwise regression equation were (in order) frequency of interaction, satisfaction with interaction, student enrollment in special education/regular education, student gender, student grade, student ethnicity (American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic, White), language spoken in the home (English, non-English), parent ethnicity, parent gender, parent education level (less than high school diploma, high school diploma, technical/trade school, college degrees, graduate degrees), number of children
the family has attending public schools within the district, and the number of years the family has had children attending schools in the district.

The parent sample was randomly divided into two equal portions for cross-sample confirmatory analyses. Multiple regression analyses were conducted on Sample 1 and Sample 2, and examined for common variables. The regression equation derived from Sample 2 was then applied to Sample 1 to assess the fit of the equation. Results of stepwise regression analysis for Sample 1 indicated that four variables (satisfaction, student grade, home language, and parent gender) significantly predicted parents’ Trust scale score ($F = 167.14, p = .00$), resulting in an $R^2$ of .41.

Results of stepwise regression analysis for Sample 2 indicated that two variables, satisfaction and student grade, significantly predicted parents’ Trust scale score ($F = 167.14, p = .00$), resulting in an $R^2$ of .34.

Because satisfaction and student grade were present in both equations, they were used for further analyses. Results were highly significant ($F = 186.06, p = .00$), indicating that the equation including satisfaction and student grade was effective in predicting parent Trust scale scores for both samples. Predicting parental total trust from this equation for Sample 1 resulted in an $R^2$ of .40. Means and beta weights indicated that higher Trust scale scores were predicted by lower grade of enrollment for students and higher levels of parent satisfaction for the relationship with their child’s teacher.

**Teacher trust.** Variables entered in the stepwise regression equation were (in order) frequency of interaction, satisfaction with interaction, teacher ethnicity, teacher gender, teacher education level, and number of years teaching. The smaller sample size precluded splitting the sample for confirmatory analysis. For teachers, only satisfaction with relationships of parents of their students provided significant prediction of overall trust. The regression equation significantly predicted trust ($F = 21.74, p = .00$); however, amount of variance accounted for ($R^2 = .10$) was small.

**Increasing Trust.** To understand parent and teacher perspectives on increasing trust within the family–school relationship, participants were asked to respond to one open-ended question that directly asked what each could do to increase trust in the other with respect to the student’s school experience. Approximately 59% of parents and 64% of teachers responding to the survey included a recommendation.

Open-ended responses were reviewed and categories were created. From an initial list of 17 descriptors, responses were coded into these eight categories: No Improvement Needed, Communication, Sensitivity to Individual Pressures and Needs, Home–School Partnership and Mutual Support, Discipline, Curricular Issues/Special Issues and Programs, Structural Issues, and Dedication to Education and Positive Academic Environment. Four
Table 3

Recommendations for Improving Trust: Parent and Teacher Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Parent % (n)</th>
<th>Teacher % (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>53.1 (391)</td>
<td>32.8 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Improvement Needed</td>
<td>12.0 (88)</td>
<td>0.7 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication to Education and Positive Academic Environment</td>
<td>10.9 (80)</td>
<td>34.3 (46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity to Individual Pressures and Needs</td>
<td>8.6 (63)</td>
<td>1.5 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Issues</td>
<td>4.8 (35)</td>
<td>0.7 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricular Issues/Special Issues and Programs</td>
<td>4.8 (35)</td>
<td>1.5 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home–School Partnership and Mutual Support</td>
<td>3.3 (24)</td>
<td>24.6 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>2.7 (20)</td>
<td>3.7 (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries refer to percent of respondents indicating an answer within the category and the raw number of respondents indicating an answer within the category.

graduate research assistants were extensively trained in this classification system. Interrater agreement between Raters 1 and 2 (Kappa = .76) and between Raters 3 and 4 (Kappa = .89) indicated acceptable levels of agreement. Results are displayed in Table 3.

Both parents and teachers strongly voiced the importance of communication as a primary way to improve trust between partners; communication was mentioned by 391 parents and 44 teachers. Teachers also endorsed the importance of two additional areas: dedication to education and a positive academic environment, and the importance of the home–school partnership and mutual support.

Parent Trust and Indicators of School Performance

We hypothesized that parent trust would be a significant correlate of four indicators of school performance for students: attendance, credits earned toward graduation, GPA, and standardized achievement test scores. We expected students of parents displaying higher levels of trust for teachers to attain higher levels of performance in school. Separate correlational analyses for grade-level categories were conducted.

Attendance data were available for all students, and represented number of days present divided by number of days enrolled (in the school year). Credits earned per year and GPA were examined for high schools students. Standardized achievement test scores for students in Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 were available for analyses.

Three achievement indicators emerged as significantly related to parent trust, all for high school students: credits earned per year ($r = .21, p = .006$), GPA ($r = .22, p = .000$), and attendance ($r = .18, p = .01$). Standardized achievement test scores were not significantly related to parent trust in this sample.
DISCUSSION

Results from this descriptive study provide an emerging picture of varied aspects of trust in the family–school relationship as represented by parents and teachers across elementary and secondary school years. We found (a) within-group differences for both parents and teachers, with trust being significantly higher for both at the elementary level; (b) between-group differences for parents and teachers at elementary and high school levels, with parent trust being significantly higher; and (c) teacher trust levels remained fairly constant across the grade-level categories, whereas parent trust levels declined between elementary and junior high school. We also found that (a) improving home–school communication was identified as a primary way to enhance trust in the family–school relationship; (b) the nature of parent–teacher interaction was a better predictor of trust than was the frequency of interaction; and (c) trust was correlated significantly with three indicators of school performance for high school students: credits earned, GPA, and attendance.

Explanation of Findings

The finding that parents trust teachers more than teachers trust parents corroborates our initial results from a study conducted in urban middle schools (Adams & Christenson, 1998) and is consistent with the literature on family involvement, which clearly suggests a decrease in the amount of family involvement as students move on to higher grades (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Additionally, these results are consistent with the theory that risk is an essential step in creating trust (Scanzoni, 1979). In contrast to parents, teachers have little at stake, personally, that would lead to initially trusting parents. Another possible explanation for the differential trust levels is that parents carry no professional credentials to imbue an initial level of trust. In an absence of a motivation to trust, teacher trust for parents may remain at the predictability stage, leading them to search for behaviors that signal that individual parents are worthy of trust. This searching mode leaves the relationship much more at the mercy of attitudinal biases such as those described by Davies (1993) and behavioral fluctuations, particularly when parents and teachers have limited amounts of contact in which to signal trustworthy behavior. The relative lack of contact with parents, diminished views of parents’ willingness and ability to help, and the absence of an incentive to trust may all explain lower levels of teacher trust for parents.

Parents’ declining trust over time may be attributable to structural differences across grade levels. In elementary schools, parents generally have one teacher with whom to communicate, build a relationship, and develop trust. As students move to secondary schools, parents and students are faced with the challenge of communicating and building relationships with
several teachers. Additionally, students are held increasingly responsible for their classroom performance and behavior. Teachers at higher grades tend to deal more directly with students, often leaving parents out of the "educational loop." The dwindling opportunities for relationship building and reduced awareness of school-related issues may be responsible, in part, for the more marked decline in parent trust between elementary and junior high.

Furthermore, as the number of students increases for which teachers are responsible, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to communicate individually and build and maintain relationships with each family. Interacting with 30 parents is significantly more manageable than doing so with 180 parents. A diffusion of responsibility may also occur when teachers share students. Responsibility for communicating with parents is frequently not clearly defined or delegated, and may fall to the wayside among numerous daily teaching demands.

Finally, the ethos regarding the family-school relationship may change over time. Currall (1992) contended that perceptions of norms for trust are an important factor in predicting willingness to trust. An implication would be that the relationship between parents and teachers would likely suffer if the school-based norm suggests lower levels of trust between parents and teachers are expected at higher grade levels. Focusing on changing these norms and creating meaningful opportunities for parents and teachers to dialogue may help reverse the decline in trust at higher grade levels.

**Merits and Limitations**

This study is one of the few empirical pieces to examine trust within the family-school relationship, moving from merely talking about the seminal nature of trust for partnerships to creating a methodology for measuring the extent trust is present. Although our investigations of trust are exploratory, we contend that the methodology we have created would be beneficial for use in schools. The methodology is represented by a family-school rating of items followed by the sentence stem "I am confident that" (see Table 1). School personnel and families could develop specific items to be rated in their respective school community. The value of our work is that the measurement of trust is important for the dialogue that can ensue about improving the family-school relationship for the learning and development of children and youth. We speculate that trust is an essential prerequisite for the elements of collaboration being called for in the implementation of Individuals With Disabilities Act, Title I, and National Educational Goal 8. In that vein, the input of parents and educators with respect to specific items to be examined is critically important.

Other merits include data collection across Grades K–12, parallel parent and teacher perspectives on closed and open-ended question formats, and
a large number of responses from both parents and teachers. Furthermore, a high level of internal consistency was demonstrated on the Trust scale, and independent and valid indicators of school performance were used. One additional strength of the current study was the use of cross-confirmatory analyses of multiple regression analyses related to parent trust levels.

Limitations are also evident and include possible bias in survey return (i.e., those parents who did not return surveys may hold significantly lower levels of trust for teachers), availability of standardized achievement testing for only a small percentage of students, and narrowness in scope for school performance indicators (e.g., little data regarding the relationship between trust and behavioral competence). Of particular concern is our 43% return rate from parents. In the future, researchers should consider the mutual generation of items across home and school and the partnership-directed approach for measurement advocated by Fantuzzo, Tighe, and Childs (1999). Such an approach would be easy to apply to our methodology and holds promise for reducing sample bias, a particularly critical issue for family–school relationships.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Parents have sent a very clear message about improving the relationship between home and school: communicate with us, share information with us, keep us informed. Similarly, teachers also cited communication as important. Based on this converging evidence, interventions to increase trust between parents and teachers may best be focused on opportunities for increasing formal and informal interaction between home and school (Christenson, 1995). Parents and teachers desire information that will support their work in educating and socializing children (Christenson, Hurley, Sheridan, & Fenstermacher, 1997). Creating family–school problem-solving teams (Weiss & Edwards, 1992) is an example of a step in addressing communication about mutually shared system-level concerns for children and youth (e.g., homework, discipline, expectations). Problem solving is easily applied to concerns for individual children, where information sharing and two-way communication is valued and practiced (Canter & Canter, 1991). In this study, two concrete signs of parent efforts to enhance teacher trust were families valuing education and learning, and creating a partnership with schools for children’s learning. Both require communication skills on the part of educators. We know parents tend to wait to be directed by school personnel for ways they can help their children be more successful in school (Dauber & Epstein, 1993).

Examining the predictors of trust for both parents and teachers clearly affirmed the critical importance of the nature of the relationship over the frequency of interaction between home and school. Similarly, Patrikaku and Weissberg (1999) found that the quality, not the frequency, of family–
school interaction was related to student achievement for students in urban education settings. As with other relationships, a poorly planned or very negative interaction between parent and teacher may be more damaging than no interaction at all. Educators don’t necessarily need to do more; however, they need to do it better. Evidence is emerging that the quality of the family–school relationship represented by the tone and information conveyed must be given high priority across school levels.

Results of the multiple regression analysis were also important for the variables that did not predict trust. Several variables, which according to popular wisdom and previous research related to parent involvement should predict trust, did not emerge as significant predictors for either parents or teachers. For example, ethnicity, gender, and other demographic variables were not predictors of trust levels. These results replicate findings by Adams and Christenson (1998) that also revealed no significant differences in parent trust as a function of income, ethnicity, or student enrollment in special education/regular education. Taken together, these results suggest the importance of process over status variables in predicting trust between parents and teachers. An implication for practice is the recognition that trust is built in stages, increases with positive interactions characterized by problem solving and conflict resolution (Christenson & Hirsch, 1998), and requires a coordinating process (Swinth, 1967).

A third implication of the results is that parents and teachers would be wise to attend to the content and source of messages about the value of school. Although a significant correlate of high schoolers’ attendance, credits earned per year, and GPA, parent trust accounts for a relatively small amount of the variance in these indicators of school performance. Nonetheless, it may be that parents who display higher levels of trust for teachers may be sending overt and subtle messages to their children about the value of learning and schooling as well as an evaluation of the child’s educational experiences and opportunities to date. When these messages are less positive, student academic achievement may falter, in part, due to the student’s lower motivational support for learning (Bempechat, 1998). Additionally, when parents and teachers are engaged in a trusting relationship, messages received at home and at school are parallel, each reinforcing the expectations and goals of each system. Consistent congruent messages across home and school have been found to enhance student engagement with learning and reduce psychosocial pressures for adolescents from ethnically diverse backgrounds (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1996).

Trust between family and school is a construct worthy of future study. To understand the effect of trust between families and schools, research is needed to (a) establish the generalizability of the current findings; (b) examine the dyadic relationship between parent and teacher for an individual student (i.e., closely examining relationships between a teacher and a parent for the benefit of a student); (c) examine the student perspective on
the effect of trust in the family–school relationship with respect to student engagement as a learner; and (d) examine how trust varies as a function of students’ academic, behavioral, and social competence. In addition, intervention studies offer promise for uncovering approaches that are most effective in building trust for parents and teachers.

**Trust and the Family–School Relationship: Final Thoughts**

Margolis and Brannigan (1986) caution that it is “important to realize that building trust cannot be rushed. It is an interactive process, involving the sharing of information, ideas, and feelings” (p. 71). Trust is a vital element in the relationship between home and school, yet research into the components of trust and the family–school relationship has only begun. Let us turn our professional energy and attention to the processes that promote a constructive relationship between family and school and that benefit personal, social, and academic success for all children. The needs of children, their families, and schools today compel us to take action on this issue.

**REFERENCES**


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