Relational Trust: *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (Bryk & Schneider, 2002)

Participants bring several lenses to bear as they observe and interpret the behavior of others in school settings. Drawing on both the extant scholarship on trust relations and our own school observations, we posit a dynamic interplay among four considerations: respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity. Individual school community members simultaneously analyze the behavior of others through all four lenses. A serious deficiency on any one criterion can be sufficient to undermine a discernment of trust for the overall relationship.

*Respect*   As noted earlier, schooling entails a long-term process of social exchange among students, teachers, parents, and school administrators. Maintaining a modicum of respect in these exchanges is a base condition for sustaining civil social interactions within a community. Such respect needs to be reciprocated by parties in each role set.

In the context of schooling, respect involves recognition of the important role each person plays in a child’s education and the mutual dependencies that exist among various parties involved in this activity. Key in this regard is how conversation takes place within a school community. A genuine sense of listening to what each person has to say marks the basis for meaningful social interaction. In many public meetings that we observed, the communication among individuals was regulated through formal parliamentary procedures. These procedures may grant someone a right to speak but do not necessarily mean that anyone actually attends to what is said. Such exchanges are quite different from those where individuals intently listen to each
other and in some fashion take others’ perspectives into account in future action. Genuine conversation of this sort signals that each person’s ideas have value and that the education of children requires that we work together cooperatively.

Concerns about respect apply in all of the role relations around schooling. Parents must be able to talk with teachers and perceive opportunities to influence the education of their own children. Teachers need to be able to voice their workplace concerns and feel that the school administration will take them into account in subsequent actions. The administration in turn needs to feel that the faculty shares its concerns for the effective functioning of the school and will give serious consideration to any proposals offered to improve it. In each case, the process of genuine listening fosters a sense of personal esteem for participants and cements their affiliation with each other and the larger institution.34

Competence. Competence in the execution of an individual’s formal role responsibilities represents the second criterion for trust discernment. This consideration connects directly to instrumental concerns about the ability to achieve desired outcomes. We recognize that in the context of the social exchanges operative around schooling, outcomes tend to be broadly defined to include not only learning objectives for children, but also effective work conditions for teachers, and administrators’ needs to maintain positive school-community relations.

Interestingly, applications of the competence criterion in school settings often involve significant asymmetry. Judgments about high standards of performance are hard to validate. As discussed earlier, the fundamental character of schooling—its multiple aims, the complex mechanisms needed to advance them, and the lack of good data on actual practice—makes it exceedingly difficult to answer such questions as: Is a principal really exemplary at leading school improvement? Is a teacher employing best practice in reading instruction? Are parents doing all they can to support schoolwork at home? While managerial aspects of principal competence are somewhat easier to ascertain (much of this behavior is easily visible), this is generally less true for teachers, whose practice typically occurs in the privacy of their classrooms. To be sure, parents want good teachers and good schools for their children, but discerning goodness remains difficult. This is especially so for poor parents who may have only a weak evaluative standpoint for making these determinations.35 For these reasons, we expect judgments about expert practice to play only a modest role in discernments of trust relations in school settings.36
Yet teachers, administrators, and parents can and readily do make judgments regarding issues of incompetence. Principals, parents, and other teachers quickly recognize when a teacher is unable to control student behavior in his or her classroom. They also can discern whether a teacher’s approach to discipline demeans students. Similarly, teachers who offer little meaningful classroom instruction are noticed too (for example, a teacher whose regular classroom practice consists of handing out worksheets and sitting in front of the class reading a newspaper). Likewise, negative judgments about principal competence are quick to form when buildings are not orderly and safe, and when individuals interact in a disrespectful manner. Other obvious signals of principal incompetence might include the absence of standard organizational routines (for example, agreed-on routines for how students will enter and exit the building), allowing gross student misconduct to go unaddressed, or failing to provide basic supplies and materials for instruction. Similarly, parents who routinely yell at teachers and cannot seem to provide for children’s most basic learning needs (such as getting them to bed at a regular hour and getting them to school on time) signal to professional staff that a relationship cannot be trusted.

In short, relational trust may exist even in the presence of considerable variation as to how well each individual actually carries out his or her role. Gross incompetence, however, is corrosive to trust relations. Allowed to persist in a school community, incompetence will undermine collective efforts toward improvement.

Personal Regard for Others  Recall our earlier observation that mutual dependence and personal vulnerabilities characterize the social exchanges of schooling. Any actions taken by a member of a role set to reduce others’ sense of vulnerability affects their interpersonal trust. Such actions typically are interpreted as an expression of benevolent intentions, and understood as signaling personal regard for the other.

In general, interpersonal trust deepens as individuals perceive that others care about them and are willing to extend themselves beyond what their role might formally require in any given situation. Principals, for example, show personal regard when they create opportunities for teachers’ career development. Expressing concern about personal issues affecting teachers’ lives is another way in which principals reach out to their staff. Correspondingly, teachers who exhibit caring commitments toward students internalize obligations more encompassing and diffuse than is typically specified in collective bargaining agreements or school board work rules. Such teachers are willing to stay extra hours to work with colleagues on program im-
provement efforts, meet with parents after school, and participate in local community affairs. They may even become personally involved in some of their students' lives outside of school.

Personal regard thus represents a powerful dimension of trust discernment in school contexts. As noted earlier, the social encounters of schooling are more intimate than typically found in associative relationships within most modern institutions. Expressions of regard for others in this context tap into a vital lifeline and, consequently, important psychosocial rewards are likely to result. When school community members sense being cared about, they experience a social affiliation of personal meaning and value. Such actions invite reciprocation from others and thereby intensify the relational ties between them.

\textit{Integrity} In our daily social encounters, we listen to what people say and watch what they do. In a basic sense, we think of individuals as having integrity if there is consistency between what they say and do. This criterion applies, for example, as teachers evaluate their principal. Can she be trusted to keep her word? Such reliable interpersonal behavior is fundamental to advancing the basic instrumental aims of any collective activity. Not surprisingly, it operates as another core criterion for trust discernments in all of the role relations sets around schooling.

In a deeper sense, integrity also implies that a moral-ethical perspective guides one's work. The previous discussion about expressions of personal concern for others pushes in this direction. A school community, however, consists of many individuals with varied interests. Conflicts often will arise among competing personal needs. In adjudicating these disputes, integrity demands resolutions that reaffirm the primary principles of the institution. In the context of schooling, when all is said and done, actions must be understood as about advancing the best interests of children. Teachers demonstrate such integrity to their colleagues when they willingly experiment with new forms of instruction to improve student learning, even though this entails additional work and the risk of failure can be high. Similarly, principals do the same thing when they are willing to speak out, for example, against a central office policy that they believe will not help the children. Behaviors of this sort publicly affirm an individual's commitment to the core purposes of the school community. Such actions tend to promote solidarity among participants by conveying the message, "Our work together is rooted in important shared beliefs and values, and members of this school community will do whatever is necessary to enact them." Embedded in this microlevel behavior is a manifestation of relational trust as a moral resource for action.
Role Set Relations: Obligations, Expectations, Dependence, and Vulnerability

The social organization of schooling structures distinct relations among teachers to other teachers, teachers to students, teachers to parents, teachers to administrators, and administrators to parents. Particular expectations and obligations characterize each role in these relation sets. Moreover, these understandings take on a distinctive coloration in large urban school districts serving highly disadvantaged student populations.

In general, the power base held by each individual directly affects the nature of relational trust in any given role set. Although gross variations exist in the power distribution across roles in an urban school community, the most significant structural feature here is that no one person typically exercises absolute power. Even the school principal—the single most influential actor in a given school commu-
nity—remains dependent on both parents and teachers. For example, principals must secure a base of parental support to maintain their jobs. Similarly, as principals seek to engage change efforts in their schools, they are dependent on the good intentions and efforts of their faculty, if new initiatives are to have any chance of succeeding.

Thus, while an asymmetric power distribution characterizes urban school communities (that is, principal power > teachers’ power > students’ and parents’ power), no single role enjoys complete dominance. This is quite different from the more absolute power exercised in a patron-client arrangement or in the case of a despotic leader. As a consequence, all parties in school role relations remain vulnerable to each other. Moreover, as will be shown, these dependencies and vulnerabilities exist even in situations where the power distribution is relatively equal, as in teacher-teacher interactions.

_School Professional–Parent Relations_ Strong asymmetry characterizes teacher-parent relations. Poor parents typically do not have the educational knowledge and skills that teachers have to help children learn. This imbalance places poor parents in a subordinate status vis-à-vis their children’s teachers in terms of selecting appropriate actions to advance student learning. As a result, poor parents are highly dependent on the efforts of school staff if meaningful opportunities are to be afforded their children. Even so, teachers also remain dependent on parental support to achieve success in their work.

At minimum, parental support entails ensuring that their children attend school regularly and arrive ready to learn; it also means parental assistance if classroom behavior problems emerge. This dependency is particularly salient at the primary grade level, where the school is an extension of the family. If learning is to occur, the trust relation developed between a parent and child during the first years of life must be transferred to school staff. Teachers need parents to signal to their children that the teacher has a special role in the child’s life, akin to that of an extended family member.

In addition, much research on teaching details the personal and intimate character of this work. Good teaching “Touches the soul” of those who practice it. While most discussions in education policy today focus on the technical dimensions of teaching and its enhancement, that teachers’ humanness is very much a part of their practice is important to remember, and teachers need expressions of personal regard and support as much as anyone else does. Thus, for instrumental reasons regarding effective instruction and for teachers to derive psychic rewards from their personal interactions with students,
teachers remain quite dependent on parental support to feel good about their work.

The dependency and vulnerabilities in the principal-parent role set follows along similar lines. Here too parents remain highly dependent on the good efforts and intentions of a school’s principal to advance learning opportunities for their children. For the principal, job tenure and role success entails maintaining good parental rapport. Thus, even though principals are not as directly involved as teachers in the education of children, their basic structural dependency with parents remains comparable.

Owing to the substantial power asymmetry in all of the professional-parent relations, the onus falls on the professionals to initiate actions that reduce parents’ sense of vulnerability in these exchanges. Common initiatives in urban schools toward this end include: creating a parent center at the school; developing support activities that parents can do at home to assist student learning; designing parent and family programs in response to local needs (for example, intergenerational literacy initiatives or GED programs); and, more generally, welcoming parents at the school and showing a personal interest in their children. Such initiatives are especially salient for poor immigrant families for whom the local public school is a foreign institution. As parents apprehend a wide range of behavior intended to make them feel more comfortable, they come to understand that school staff have genuine regard for them and truly care about their children. Such discernment of intentions can have very positive effects on the overall quality of these role relations.

Further complicating parent-professional relations are the class, race, and ethnic differences that frequently exist between families and professional staff in urban contexts. As noted earlier, prior research on interpersonal trust documents that social similarities by race, ethnicity, and class offer an initial basis for trusting another until specific evidence has accumulated on a particular relationship. By extension, the absence of social similarity signals a possible reason for withholding trust. Thus, to effect relational trust in urban school contexts may require more conscious attention than might be the case in more culturally homogeneous contexts.
Teacher-Student Relationships  Trusting student-teacher relations are essential for learning. These exchanges take on a distinctive form in the early grades, resembling parent-child interactions. For successful learning to occur here, the trust built up in family life must be transferred to the classroom teacher. Assuming this happens, elementary grade teachers will hold diffuse affective power over their students. Given this power asymmetry in the student-teacher role set, the growth of trust depends primarily on teachers’ initiatives. Such initiatives include both establishing a familylike climate in the classroom that builds on students’ affective experiences at home, and engaging parents in a supportive relationship around their child’s learning.54

As students progress through the grades and gradually become more responsible for their own learning, the role dependency between teacher and student changes. By middle school, the mutual obligations for learning become more explicit between students and teachers. This change continues through high school, closely paralleling adolescents’ self-identity development. In addition, powerful peer group influences emerge at this point. Thus, a theory of trust in secondary schools would also have to conceptualize trust as a collective concern among students rooted in prevailing student norms.