School Principals’ Influence on Trust: Perspectives of Mothers of Children with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT. The authors employed a qualitative research design to explore issues of trust in family–professional relationships. They specifically focused on the nature of trust between mothers of children with disabilities and school principals. Analysis of the mothers’ responses to face-to-face interview questions yielded two primary categories related to their perspectives regarding principals: (a) personal and professional principal attributes and (b) principal actions within the education system, with students, and with students’ families. Subcategories were developed that further delineated the relationships participants had with the principals of their children’s educational programs. The authors address implications for school leadership and the establishment of trust-worthy family-professional relationships, especially as they impact the lives of students and families in need of special education support.

Keywords: parents of children with disabilities, school principals, trust

Parents are meant to be included as fundamental participants in educational organizations. Decades of research have supported the role of parent involvement in positive educational outcomes for students (Colarusso & O’Rourke, 2007; Freiberg, 2006). Recent legal mandates require school systems to engage parents in meaningful ways. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; 2002) calls for school systems to facilitate parent involvement (Keller, 2006) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA; 2004) mandates parental involvement in all aspects of assessment and service delivery for students who receive special education support (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004). In light of these legal mandates and underlying fundamental principles of family–school relationships, trust between parents and educational professionals has emerged as a critical factor (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Dunst, Johanson, Rounds, Trivette, & Hamby, 1992). Trust may influence student achievement because of its role in establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships between home and school, and trust may shape parents’ attitudes toward educational systems and influence their engagement in their children’s educational programs (Dunst et al.; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Bryk and Schneider found that was not only trust associated with greater gains in student achievement, but also with longer lasting gains in achievement.

Consequently, not only is trust between parents and education professionals necessary for effective partnerships stipulated by legal mandates, but also, and more importantly, it appears to have a positive effect on student outcomes, and it is the students themselves who are the true beneficiaries of trusting relationships between parents and education professionals. However, if trust is valuable to parents, teachers, and students, it is incumbent on school principals to foster it, maintain it, and exemplify trusting relationships with all parents, including parents of children with disabilities. Indeed, trust is “increasingly recognized as a critical element of leadership” (Tschannen-Moran, 2003, p. 162) and the leadership of schools, the principals, must understand their vital role in establishing trust.

Many definitions of trust exist in the literature. In their review of literature on trust, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) found 16 definitions of trust. They identified five facets of trust reflected in those definitions, including benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. Based on those facets of trust, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran proposed that trust is “an individual’s or group’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (p. 189). In this definition, they established vulnerability as a precursor to the need for trust. The need
for trust rests on the recognition of the potential for betrayal or harm from another person. When that risk does not exist, we have no need to trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The latter part of the definition identifies five facets, or dimensions, that influence the extent of trust. This definition served as a conceptual foundation for the present report of a study of the perspectives of mothers of children with disabilities on the role of school principals in facilitating or inhibiting the establishment and maintenance of trust between parents of children with disabilities and education professionals. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran’s facets of trusts, particularly benevolence, openness, and competence, were reflected in the principal attributes and actions that emerged from the present study as facilitators of trust.

**Trust and School Leaders**

On a systems level, trust is identified as a critical factor in school reform (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). School leaders can influence the nature of trust within educational systems (Kochanek, 2005; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The significance of teachers’ and parents’ trust in school principals is strong and can influence trust among other constituents (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Among school leaders, principals in particular can influence the overall school climate and thereby influence trust (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Collegial leadership, or the openness of the leadership behavior of the principal, is a predictor of school climate, which in turn also influences overall trust (Hoy et al.).

As leaders who set the tone in schools, principals are responsible for building and maintaining trusting relationships (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). To demonstrate how principals might fulfill this responsibility, Tschannen-Moran (2004) offered a three-dimensional Trustworthy Leadership Matrix (p. 176). She emphasized the usefulness of considering not only five facets of trust (i.e., benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence) in relation to five constituencies of schools (i.e., administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the public), but also five functions of school leadership in understanding how school principals’ behavior can significantly influence school climate and culture. These functions of leadership, as applied to trust, include (a) developing a vision of a trustworthy school, (b) serving as a role model for trustworthiness through language and action, (c) facilitating teacher competence through effective coaching, (d) improving school discipline among students and teachers through effective management, and (e) mediating conflict and repair in a constructive and honest manner. Administrator trustworthiness, then, is demonstrated by nurturing and balancing relationships among facets of trust, constituencies of schools, and the functions of leadership.

Bryk and Schneider (2003) discussed the demonstration of respect as one critical facet of the trust definition for school principals. They claimed that respect is closely related to other facets of trust, particularly openness, benevolence, and reliability. Bryk and Schneider defined respect as part of the social discourse within school communities. When educators in a school system demonstrate respect in their social exchanges, they contribute to the development of trust. Principals serve as models of these social exchanges for other school personnel (Kochanek, 2005). Openness, as a part of the trust definition, refers to the perception of one party that another party is forthcoming with relevant information and one party’s confidence that another party does not withhold relevant information (Butler & Cantrell, 1984; Mishra, 1996). This openness signals a kind of reciprocal trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Benevolence, as demonstrated by caring and support, also influences reciprocal trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy) and is valued by principals’ constituents (Bryk & Schneider; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Finally, reliability is demonstrated not only through predictability but also through commitment and dedication.

These facets of trust are principal characteristics valued by parents. As Bryk and Schneider noted, “Almost every parent and teacher we spoke with at this school commented effusively about the principal’s personal style, his openness to others, and his willingness to reach out to parents, teachers, and students” (p. 42).

Although the research cited above applies to all relationships of trust within a school, there is a growing body of research that has focused on these issues as related to parents of children with disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities may have increased interaction with educational administrators simply by the nature of special education delivery. Administrators and parents of children with disabilities are part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. Parents and administrators are integral to team decisions and, through stipulations in the IDEIA, parents are to be considered equal and active team members. Beyond the legal requirements of parental involvement with children with disabilities, recent research has investigated parent perspectives regarding various aspects of interactions with education professionals (Angell, & Bailey, & Stoner, 2008; Bailey, Parete, Stoner, Angell, & Carroll, 2006; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Stoner, Angell, House, & Bock, 2007; Stoner et al., 2005). This research has revealed that trust is a major factor in the complex relationship between parents of children with disabilities and education professionals (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Stoner & Angell; Stoner et al., 2005).

Parents of children with disabilities also have the right to implement due process proceedings if they disagree with the decisions of the IEP team (IDEIA, 2004). Due process safeguards “afford parents a basic right of protest when they disagree with the educational decisions and actions of the school district” (Fiedler, Simpson, & Clark, 2007, p. 207). These due process safeguards provide for increased opportunities between parents and educational administrators and hence provide additional opportunities for trust to be influenced. If due process is lengthy and involves hiring
attorneys, it can be quite costly to the school district and parents. The IDEIA encourages but does not require mediation prior to the implementation of due process. Lake and Billingsley (2000) investigated perspectives of parents and education professionals involved in due process cases. Nearly 90% of their parent participants reported the initiation or escalation of conflict as a result of discrepant perceptions between parents and other team members’ differing perceptions of children’s needs. In their study, parents reported dissatisfaction with school teams who did not recognize children’s individuality (i.e., did not recognize individual strengths and limitations separate from a disability label). In addition, parents felt as though schools operated from a deficit perspective, placing too much emphasis on what children cannot do as opposed to focusing on or recognizing the strengths of each child (Aigne, Colvin, & Baker, 1998; Lake & Billingsley). It should be noted that the discrepant perspectives between parents and education professionals developed over time as parents perceived negative interactions with school teams.

In addition, when parents and educational teams operate from discrepant viewpoints with regard to assessment and service delivery, parents are more likely to distrust future exchanges when their expectations are not met (Stoner & Angell, 2006). Principals can influence the impact of these discrepant viewpoints through their influence on school climate. Tschanne-Moran (2004) described the relationship among principals, overall school trust and climate, and parents’ trust:

Principals play an important role in creating the context for trust to develop between parents and the school and between teachers and parents. The school leader creates the framework and structure for these relationships and, by example, may set the tone for these interactions as well. (p. 136)

More specifically, principals’ interactions with individual students and families can influence the overall child-centeredness of schools (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Kochanek, 2005; Soodak & Erwin, 2000).

Establishing and maintaining trust does not ensure that school districts never face a due process hearing; however, a trusting relationship has the potential to minimize conflict and lead to resolution. Consequently, principals have a major responsibility to positively contribute to the establishment of trust with all parents, including parents of children with disabilities, who may be interacting with great frequency with education professionals, including teachers, related service personnel, and principals.

Purpose of the Study

The role of the principal in establishing or influencing overall organizational trust in schools has emerged from extant research (e.g., Hoy et al., 2002; Hoy & Tschanne-Moran, 1999). More recent research has addressed characteristics and actions that can be taken by principals to improve organizational trust (e.g., Kochanek, 2005). The importance of trust in establishing effective home-school partnerships for students with disabilities is also strongly supported in recent research (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Stoner et al., 2005; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). Given the critical role principals can assume in establishing trust, further research is needed on how they influence levels of trust in relationships between families of children with disabilities and education professionals.

The present study emerged from a broader study of the perspectives of mothers of children with disabilities on trust in education personnel (Angell, Stoner, & Shielden, 2009). Although we did not inquire specifically about the role of administrators, the strong influence of administrators, particularly school principals, was apparent during interviews with 16 mothers of children of varying disabilities, ages, and geographical settings. We then re-examined our data to address the following research question:

What are the perspectives of mothers of children with disabilities on trust in school principals?

Method

Research Design

We employed a qualitative research methodology to gain insight into the nature of trust of mothers of children with disabilities in school principals. We viewed trust as the central phenomenon requiring exploration and understanding (Creswell, 2002). Considering the nature of our target phenomenon (i.e., trust), we followed the advice of Strauss and Corbin (1998) who explained that “qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional methods” (p. 11).

The method used for the present study was the collective case study as described by Stake (2000). Collective case study involves the study of more than one case in order to “investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition” (p. 437). This approach assumes that investigating a number of cases leads to better comprehension and better theorizing (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Miles and Huberman (1994) contended that studying multiple cases gives the researcher reassurance that the events in only one case are not “wholly idiosyncratic” (p. 172). Further, studying multiple cases allowed us to see processes and outcomes across all cases and enabled a deeper understanding through more powerful descriptions and explanations.

Participants

We used a purposive sampling technique that included snowballing methods to recruit a heterogeneous group of mothers of school-aged children with disabilities as participants in this study, basing the rationale for our maternal focus on research indicating that mothers have more contact
with education professionals than do fathers (e.g., David, 1998; Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997; Nord & West, 2001; Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992). We purposefully included a range of mothers who had children with various disabilities across various grade levels in schools from several school districts that represented a range of settings (e.g., rural, suburban, urban). We expected this sampling methodology to afford us maximum opportunities for comparable analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of mothers from a variety of backgrounds and experiences with schools, as well as having children with a variety of disabilities and at various ages.

Participants were recruited using three techniques: (a) district-level administrators’ distribution of recruitment materials; (b) individual school personnel’s distribution of recruitment materials; and (c) a participant referral snowballing technique, whereby participants distributed recruitment materials to other mothers who might express different perspectives or had had different experiences with education professionals. This sampling method facilitated our attaining as much variation as possible within our sample (Patton, 1980). In our initial recruitment phase, after obtaining university approval to conduct the research, we mailed explanatory and invitational letters to several school district administrators in a Midwestern state, asking them to distribute the letters to potential participants if they approved of our interviewing mothers with children in their schools. In the invitational letters, mothers were asked to return permission-to-contact forms if they were interested in participating in the study. Although it was designed to protect potential participants’ identities until they agreed to meet with us for interviews, this method of recruitment proved to be minimally effective, yielding only 2 participants. We tentatively attributed administrators’ or mothers’ reluctance to participate to the nature of the study (i.e., the investigation of trust) and consequently asked school principals and various school personnel (e.g., therapists and special education teachers) to assist us in recruiting participants.

During the second phase of recruitment, school personnel sent permission-to-contact forms to potential participants with whom they had regular contact. On receipt of this approval, we scheduled one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with the mothers, explained the study, and obtained informed consent. We tentatively attributed the success of this recruitment method to the nature of the relationships participants had with the education professionals who contacted them or to the personal contact. Personal contact from familiar individuals within their schools or districts may have influenced the mothers’ willingness to participate.

Our second and third recruitment phases yielded an additional 14 participants. Our final participant pool consisted of 16 mothers of children with various disabilities. They ranged in age from 18 to 55 years. In all, 12 mothers were Caucasian, 1 was African American, and 3 were Hispanic. One of the Hispanic mothers had limited English proficiency, so a Spanish-speaking interpreter assisted during her interview. Most of the mothers were from urban and suburban areas and 2 were from rural areas. These mothers and their children represented eight school districts, varying grade levels, and a range of geographical areas (i.e., rural, suburban, and urban). See Table 1 for participant demographics.

**Interviews**

Data were collected via semistructured interviews, which Fontana and Frey (2000) described as “one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings” (p. 645). Face-to-face interviews occurred in the mothers’ homes or at places the mothers designated (e.g., restaurants, coffee shops) and ranged in length from 60 to 90 min. The interview questions, which focused on trust, relationships with education professionals, and situations where trust was either enhanced or diminished, are provided in the Appendix. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim to facilitate subsequent data analysis.

Each interview was conducted by one of the first three authors. The 16 single-participant interviews consisted of broad, open-ended questions designed to investigate mothers’ perspectives on their trust in education professionals. As we interviewed the mothers, we probed for further information, elaboration, or clarification of responses as we deemed appropriate. Semistructured interviews permitted us to address the issue of trust while maintaining a feeling of openness (Kvale, 1996).

**Data Analysis**

The findings related to mothers’ trust in school principals actually emerged as one of several categories or themes we identified as we analyzed our interview data. Besides reporting the findings related to overall trust in education professionals (Angell et al., 2009), we decided to report separately on other emergent themes, such as mothers’ trust in school principals, issues related to communication, and teaming factors. Once we had analyzed all the interview data and identified the major themes, we then focused more closely on specific themes and developed concept maps that guided our reports. For example, when we reported on our overall findings (Angell et al.), we did not have the journal space to delve into and discuss our findings related to mothers’ trust in school principals. We took all the data that were categorized as administrator perspectives from our larger study and conducted additional analysis by revisiting the data, recoding the data, and categorizing the themes. Therefore, we selected this set of data for its own in-depth analysis and discussion due to the perspectives of our participants that principals had a significant impact on their trust in education professionals.

We used cross-case analysis as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) to study each mother (i.e., case) as a whole entity, using line-by-line coding of each mother’s interview responses, followed by a comparative analysis of all
16 cases. Each researcher independently line-by-line coded each interview and all codes were entered in NVivo7 software (Richards, 2002). Next, we met as a team on several occasions to discuss the codes, identify emergent themes, and reach concordance on the development of a concept map (shown in Figure 1) that represents the study's findings. We used a flexible standard of categories, meaning we adjusted our categories as additional data from each case was analyzed in depth (Coffey & Atkinson, 1992). As categories emerged, we used a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2000) to compare cases and to refine, expand, or delete categories as needed. This type of coding procedure helped us stay in tune with the mothers' views as we continually studied our interview data (Charmaz). As we discussed any disagreements we had about emergent categories, we returned to the verbatim data to again ascertain the participants' viewpoints, and continued this process until we agreed on all categories. This process of cross checking coding of the major categories provided “thoroughness for interrogating the data” and allowed for discussion that enhanced insights of the coding (Barbour, 2001, p. 1116).

**Confirmability**

We engaged in methods of respondent validation (Creswell, 2002) and member checking (Janesick, 2000) to confirm our findings. To secure respondent validation, we presented a summary of our findings to the interviewees by telephone or e-mail, asking them if they concurred with any or all of the emergent perspectives, that is, if they saw their personal perspectives represented in any or all of the reported findings. We also conducted member checks as a means of confirming the findings. Through member checking, we asked participants to comment on the accuracy of verbatim quotes and obtained their approval to use their direct personal quotes in written or verbal reports of the study. All 16 participants confirmed that the summary of findings adequately and accurately represented their perspectives on trust in school principals and all the mothers whose direct quotes appear in the report gave permission to cite them.

**Limitations and Scope of the Study**

Although we used accepted qualitative research methods for this study, we recognize that the validity of the findings may be affected by certain limitations. The first limitation of this study was that we did not explicitly plan to gather data on mothers' trust in school principals. Rather, these data emerged from the data gathered for broader research questions about mothers' trust in education professionals. The use of a semistructured interview protocol allowed us to probe further when participants discussed their trust in principals. However, we did not explicitly ask all participants about their trust in school principals or their perspectives on how those principals might influence their trust in other education professionals.

The second limitation of this study was that we did not establish extended relationships with the participants. We
interviewed each mother once. Multiple interviews would have been ideal. However, we feel that the initial data and our analysis of them provided a strong foundation for more in-depth examinations of trust between parents of children with disabilities and school principals. We also recognize that the generalizability of the findings might have been limited by the nature of our participants. Although these findings are based on the perceptions of only 16 mothers from one state, these participants reflected ethnic, racial, and economic diversity and were mothers of children of various ages and disabilities. The recruitment of participants through school personnel might have also limited the generalizability of the findings, in that school personnel might have identified mothers with whom they felt they had positive, established relationships.

Results

Interviews centered on the issue of trust and the perspectives of the participants regarding their relationships with education professionals. Relationships with administrators, primarily school principals, emerged from all participants as one of the education professionals who had a strong effect on the trust of the mothers of children with disabilities. Two primary categories were identified as affecting the participants’ perspectives of principals: (a) principal attributes (personal and professional) and (b) principal actions within the education system, with students, and with students’ families. Additionally, within each of these primary categories, subcategories were developed that further delineated the relationships participants had with the principals at their children’s schools.

Principal Attributes

Principal attributes can be viewed as those individual characteristics that participants identified as affecting their trust. Attributes were categorized as either personal or professional. Within each of those two categories, the attributes could positively or negatively affect the relationship participants had with principals.

Personal attributes. All participants had interacted at one time or another with administrators, primarily principals.
Interactions might have been brief but participant perspectives were developed over a long period of time. Participants might have had numerous relationships with their children's teachers but relationships with principals were consistent over a longer period of time. Principal personal attributes were part of principals' characters that participants perceived during their interactions. We categorized these personal attributes as approachability and authentic caring.

Approachability was identified as a positive influence on the trust of the participants in principals. Principals who were perceived as approachable were those who not only took the time to listen but also conveyed an accepting attitude that resulted in parents comfortably approaching them with their concerns. For example, Norine stated,

You know, I had talked to him earlier in the year about how I thought it would really be important that those end-of-the-year awards that the kids all get, that every kid could get an award. And I didn't want to speak just about my son but obviously that's where it's coming from. But he just dreads those awards. He would have no reason to think that he could attain an art award, a music award, a scholastic award, nothing. He has nothing to shoot for. . . . He [the principal] was, you know, very approachable about that and he has substituted some reading awards. So, now I just have to read with T. I feel like I have to do it now because I was the one that planned this.

However, not all participants described their principals as approachable. For example, Nicole described her son's principal as "personable, but not to the point where I feel I could sit down and talk to her on a personal level at all." Even if a principal was accessible, approachability was identified as the key to a mother's connecting and developing trust in the principal.

Similarly, another key to developing trust was the perception that the principal authentically cared for the children and their parents. Authentic caring can be viewed as actions and behaviors that participants identified as genuine, voluntary, child-focused, and benefiting children or the parents themselves. Ursula exemplified this concept when she described her son's principal: "He knew that my son had problems, so he would actually be checking out his assignment book as he left."

Authentic caring did not have to necessarily result in actions; it was often a perception of warmth that parents described from their interactions with principals. Dolorita talked about the principal from her son's school who had retired in the previous year: "Yes, very good [referring to her relationship with the principal]. She was always welcoming the parents. Really warm."

Principals who were trusted by participants were described as warm, respectful, and exhibiting caring for children that was perceived as authentic.

Professional attributes. Attributes that were categorized as professional also affected the trust participants had in principals. These professional attributes included accessibility and knowledge of disabilities.

Principal accessibility was highly valued by all participants. Teresa spoke of the accessibility of her son's principal: "She was very nice, she was so helpful with me any time that I need anything. She was there and if I needed to talk to her she was right there." Participants recognized how busy principals were and perhaps that recognition made them value the time principals offered even more, illustrated by Monica's comment: "Even if she was busy she would take the minutes off." Vickie highly valued the principal time given to her when she had concerns:

I just called her and she sat on the phone with me for like a half an hour. And she had me come out and she gave me some books and, I mean, they are all, I think they are all wonderful.

Mary related an incident concerning programs for her son with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). She had expressed concern about her child's placement in a new program to the special education administrator.

So I said I'd go ahead and try it out and I kinda wanted him to stay where he was. She's like "Well, you know, you want to go with it and you can try it out and then we can pull him out if you don't like it or feel comfortable with it." So I said, "Okay." And we went ahead and tried it and then I called her up saying that I wasn't comfortable with him going there and just for all the happenings that were going on and we'd like him to go back to the first school and she said, "Okay, we can make some calls."

This incident illustrates the value of accessibility when participants feel a strong need to speak with principals. Accessibility was a necessary prerequisite for the establishment of trust and was mentioned by all participants. Participants were also keenly aware of the knowledge principals had about their children's disabilities. Valerie spoke of the knowledge a new principal had of her son's disability and the subsequent effect on the entire school staff.

They also have a new principal, who I think is a little bit more aware of that [the disability]. I think the staff, whether they know it or not, takes cues from the principal as to whether the principal's going to follow up, whether this is something serious that we need to take note of. Is this really important, or is it something I can put a second priority on?

One incident in which the principal and staff had no knowledge of her daughter's disorder prompted Olivia to offer to provide an in-service session to the entire school staff. The principal readily agreed and this was appreciated by the parent.

So I did a lot of reading on the issue, prepared a presentation. It was a good hour long, and they even stayed after to ask questions. I was really surprised. You know, we're talking an in-service that is in the evening, when people can be freed up from the classroom. It was 6–7:30 in the evening, and they made it mandatory.

The lack of knowledge of the disability was not viewed as an inhibitor to trust unless it was accompanied by a lack of desire to learn. Terri withdrew her child from a parochial
school when she perceived that the staff was unwilling to address her son’s disability. This perception appeared to contrast directly with the principal’s words indicating that her son should remain at the school.

Right, it is like I am, you know, I am very into the school. And the principal said “No we will leave him here.” You know, and I said “No” because I am not going to force somebody on him. I am not going to do that to them just like I am not going to force that person onto my son.

One participant, Yvonne, spoke of the benefit of having the same principal during her son’s vertical transition from preschool through elementary school. Yvonne was in an unusual situation in which her son’s principal had moved from the preschool to the elementary school attended by her son. She spoke of the benefit of the principal’s and the staff’s continuous knowledge of her son’s development and progress:

I think again it’s just been continuity and it’s been more than just the principal that’s been continually in his case; each time we meet people they seem to be amazed, everyone that is sitting around the table seems to be amazed at the progress that he’s made. Yeah so they take great pride in him as do I and I don’t know if he does yet, but he should.

Unfortunately, participants also recalled instances when principals did not recognize their children’s disabilities, did not know their children, and at times appeared to dismiss parents’ concern for their children. Ursula stated,

The only thing I do want to add is I think the principals of each school should be more involved in IEP meetings. I know they’re invited to it, but they never show up. So they might know this child is in special education but if they don’t sit down and listen to everything, they really don’t know the child.

Principals who were approachable, exhibited authentic caring, were accessible, and had knowledge of disabilities were identified as enhancing trust between participants and principals. Conversely, when these attributes were perceived as lacking, trust was negatively affected. Participants were aware that if principals valued their children and themselves, an example was set for the staff to follow.

Principal Actions

Actions spoke loudly to the participants. They identified actions that were categorized into three subcategories: (a) actions within the system, (b) actions with children, and (c) actions with families. These actions, or, at times, lack of action, had a significant effect on the trust participating parents had in principals.

Actions within the system involved actions that were focused on issues such as encouraging teachers’ involvement with parents and attendance at IEP meetings. When participants experienced or observed these actions, they felt principals truly were concerned about the student body and about their students with disabilities as well. Monica illustrated this by comparing the new principal of her son’s school with the previous one, illustrating the issue of teacher involvement with parent fundraising efforts.

And Mrs. F [the previous principal] was pushing the teachers to join, and pushing the teachers to do things. When we [Parent–Teacher Organization] did a pizza fundraiser she made every teacher order lunch with the kids for the room. She just was so involved in supporting all that stuff. And she knew we would in turn, money would go back to her. Whatever money we raised would go back to the school. I don’t think he [the new principal] sees that. So, she was very much into everything.

Several participants indicated that principal attendance at IEP meetings was an action that facilitated trust. Attendance not only affected the participants but the staff that was directly involved with the child. Valerie spoke of the significance of her son’s principal attending the IEP meeting: “And I just think, especially at the IEP meetings, even if they’re only there for 5–10 minutes, especially at the middle school, at least what I saw, it made a quite a difference . . . quite a difference.”

While attendance at IEP meetings was appreciated, if it did not occur on a regular basis, principal attendance became an indicator of a problem. Carole recalled that the only IEP meeting her son’s principal attended was one that was contentious. The principal attended only when the conflict had grown to a point where she was considering filing due process. Carole felt that once the principal fully recognized her son’s disability, his perception of her and her son changed drastically.

He actually saw my son then, and saw that these parents are not making this up. He [her son] has trouble speaking, too, so that people can’t understand him, it’s not just that he has trouble writing, everything is delayed to some degree. He can do everything but it just takes longer and he needs assistance. Before that the principal just thought I was a complaining parent.

It should be noted that most of our participants indicated that principals did not attend IEP meetings. Participants also reported there was significantly less principal involvement in IEP meetings at the middle and secondary levels. Principal actions with students that affected parent trust were numerous. When the principals took a personal interest in their children, parents noticed. Ursula reported that one of her son’s principals was very involved with all the students in the school, including those with disabilities.

My son had a principal in fifth and sixth grade, Mr. L, he was on top of it. He was a very good principal. He would be checking the kids out. He was just very—he was not just a principal that stays in his office. He would get there and be involved with all the kids. He knew that my son had had problems so he would actually be checking out his assignment book as he left.

Involvement with students, and especially involvement that included students with disabilities, was appreciated and recognized by our participants and had a positive effect on...
their establishment of trust in education professionals. Conversely, ignoring students or a perceived nonaction by principals was perceived negatively and had an inhibiting effect on the establishment of trust. Carole described this perception as, “A few times they’ve [principals] been involved. I don’t feel like they ever took a stand on anything. They just kind of were there.”

Principals’ actions with parents directly also had the potential of positively affecting trust. DeDe related a conversation with a vice principal:

Because when last year my son was in it was his first year and he’s mainstreamed. So she was . . . I was going to get his grades and she said, “How did he do?” And I said he did fine, but he was in fourth grade and doing fifth grade math and I was like well, he got a “C” in math, that was the only thing. She was like but you should be proud of him and I said I am proud of him. She kinda like, she was encouraging me to encourage him. She said “‘cause you have to think he’s in fourth grade, he’s doing fifth grade math; he got a ‘C’ so that’s wonderful.” So I was like you know for a vice principal to come and talk to the parents is really good. So she talked to me and you know they are very encouraging and I think if I ever needed anything or needed to talk to one of them I could go up there and talk to them.

Actions with parents that were positively perceived were a focus on actively listening to parents and offering advice or assistance when needed, resulting in an enhancement of trust. However, not all principal actions with participants were positive.

Pat related an incident of requesting an evaluation for her son, who was having significant difficulties in school. Pat had spoken with a special educator, who had advised her to ask for an assessment for her son:

She [the special educator] said “there is something not right here. And I can see this and you can deal with this. Go to the principal and tell him that he has to have him tested.” And so I went and I told him and he [the principal] is like, “No, he is just a disruptive little boy.”

Participants related other incidents that decreased trust, similar to the one stated above. These incidents were ones that did not respect or acknowledge parent perspectives.

Participants identified principal attributes and actions that enhanced trust and spoke strongly of times when these same attributes and actions were absent and inhibited their trust in principals. Participants wanted to trust principals; they appreciated principals who were accessible and evidenced authentic caring for their children and they described principal actions within the educational system, with their children, and with their families that facilitated their trust.

Discussion

Through an examination of the perspectives of mothers of children with disabilities, the present study findings revealed insights into the critical role school administrators, specifically principals, may assume in establishing and maintaining trust between schools and families. After a consideration of the limitations of this study, we discuss key findings from a school leadership framework. We then discuss implications for practice and future research.

Principals’ Influence on Trust

As depicted in Figure 1, the mothers we interviewed identified principals’ attributes and actions that can have positive and negative influences on trust. They spoke primarily of school principals rather than special education administrators when they discussed school leaders. The findings on influential attributes and actions that emerged from these interviews were consistent with previous research on trust, particularly on trust in and as facilitated by school leaders (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Kochanek, 2005; Tschanne-Moran, 2004). However, these findings extend past research by illuminating how trustworthy leadership may connect to the educational experiences of students with disabilities and their families.

Through her leadership matrix, Tschanne-Moran (2004) presented a framework for school leadership that promotes trust. The framework identified facets of trust, constituencies of schools, including parents, and functions of instructional leadership. The functions of leadership in the framework—visioning, modeling, coaching, managing, and mediating—can be demonstrated in a manner that inhibits or facilitates trust. We discuss our key findings in relationship to this framework for trustworthy school leadership.

Facets of Trust

Five facets of trust are included in Tschanne-Moran’s (2004) leadership matrix, including benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. Past research has confirmed the centrality of these facets to building trusting relationships in schools (see Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Hoy & Tschanne-Moran, 1999; Tschanne-Moran & Hoy, 1998, 2000). The personal and professional attributes that emerged in the present study as influences on mothers’ trust in school principals reflect aspects of the facets of trust, specifically benevolence, openness, and competence.

Benevolence involves demonstrating caring, support, and respect. It may be the most critical facet of trust (Tschanne-Moran, 2004) and is valued by constituencies of school leaders (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschanne-Moran). Mothers in this study identified the personal attribute of authentic caring, perceived as warmth and respect, as a critical influence on trust. Authentic caring also involves acceptance of a child (Noddings, 1992). For parents of children with disabilities, this may take on particular importance as they value school leaders who demonstrate acceptance despite the nature of a disability. Principals who have limited experience with children with disabilities may have difficulty demonstrating acceptance of all children (Alonzo, Bushy, Hasazi, Johnston, & Miller, 2006) and hence trust may be negatively affected.
Approachability and accessibility both emerged from this study as personal attributes that affected trust. These attributes are components of openness, one of the facets of trust identified by Tschannen-Moran (2004). Openness is critical to trust, and involves vulnerability and open communication. Openness involves a willingness to communicate and share information (Tschannen-Moran). In identifying approachability as a positive influence on trust, the mothers in the present study described school leaders who listened to parent concerns and facilitated a climate where parents felt comfortable approaching them with concerns. When working with parents of children with disabilities, it may be important for principals to be engaged in conversations about parental concerns with parents themselves rather than delegating those concerns to special education personnel.

Competence was another aspect of trust identified by Tschannen-Moran (2004) and the participants in our study. Our findings suggest that knowledge of a student’s disability or, at the very least, the desire to learn about a particular disability, is an important aspect affecting the perceived competence of school leaders. Principals often lack specific training related to understanding various disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003), but their effective leadership for all constituencies in a school requires a basic understanding of disabilities and an understanding of special education processes (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas). Principals may need to seek additional training or information through professional organizations or through collaborating with special education administrators.

Functions of Leadership

The trustworthy leadership matrix presented by Tschannen-Moran (2004) includes five functions of leadership—visioning, modeling, coaching, managing, and mediating—that can influence the culture of trust within their schools. Principal actions, which closely paralleled Tschannen-Moran’s functions, were readily identified by the study participants as affecting their trust in school principals. The mothers in the present study described leadership actions related to these functions, particularly the functions of modeling, coaching, and mediating.

Mothers participating in the present study discussed the importance of modeling when they described the impact of principals’ actions on other education personnel. For instance, principal attendance at IEP meetings was valued not only because the principal demonstrated commitment by his or her presence, but also because that attendance was perceived as sending a message to faculty that the IEP process was important. Modeling the importance of these processes necessitates principals having an understanding of the special education system and assuming an active rather than delegating role in those processes.

Closely related to modeling, coaching involves exerting the appropriate amount of pressure and support to facilitate desired changes in teacher behavior. In the present study, the importance of coaching was reflected in mothers’ comments regarding principal actions within the system, including encouraging general education teacher attendance at IEP meetings and encouraging teacher involvement in parent-teacher organizations.

In the present study, mothers identified conflicts that arose from various sources, such as disagreement with teachers or delays in receiving related services. Principal mediation of those conflicts affected the mothers’ perceptions of the trustworthiness of their relationships with these principals. Mediation is a common need within the special education system and refers to actions leaders take to deal with conflicts and repair trust. In this context, mediation differs from the structured resolution process identified in IDEIA and is instead leadership actions taken outside of a formal process. Mediation is extremely valuable when conflicts initially emerge and it has the ability to reduce escalation of conflict, possibly preventing formal resolution or due process. Principal mediation was perceived as varied by mothers in this study, yet the overall perspective was that effective mediation increased parental trust. Specifically, an effective mediation strategy that emerged from our findings was the willingness of principals to address concerns directly rather than downplaying concerns or delegating them to other school personnel. As with other attributes and actions identified in the present study, principals may be at a disadvantage due to a lack of training related to children with disabilities and special education processes (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). However, it should be emphasized that the lack of knowledge was not as large a barrier as lack of action.

Conclusion

Mothers of children with disabilities identified attributes and actions of school leaders that influenced trust. If school leaders, and particularly principals, are to establish and maintain trust with all of their constituencies, including children with disabilities, their teachers, and their families, they need to examine how trustworthy leadership relates to the special education system. These findings suggest that the facets of benevolence, openness, and competence may have high significance when considering how principals relate to families of children with disabilities. Likewise, these findings suggest that leadership functions of modeling, coaching, and mediating may require specialized competencies or considerations related to students with disabilities. School principals who desire more effective collaboration between school and families of children with disabilities may need to become more personally involved in the special education programs within their schools. Direct involvement in IEP meetings and other educational decision making, caring and acceptance of children with disabilities, a willingness to learn more about students with disabilities, and demonstrating leadership in educational decisions and climate related to students with disabilities may all be effective steps in enhancing trust with families of children with disabilities. These findings also suggest a need to examine the extent to which school principal personnel preparation programs are adequately
preparing school principals to build trust and effective partnerships with parents of students with disabilities.

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX
Trust Study Interview Questions

[Advise interviewee that she can apply most of these questions to ANY education professionals in her child’s life—administrators, teachers, assistants, related services personnel like SLPs, OTs, PTs…]

1. Tell me about your child.
2. How would you generally describe your relationship with (child’s name)’s teacher? [teachers]
3. Describe the trust you have in the professionals who work with your child.
   [Do you trust the education professionals who work with your child?… Probe: Please describe this trust/lack of trust…]
4. Have there been situations or experiences that have increased your level of trust in the professionals who work with your child? [Tell me about this/these…]
5. Have there been situations that have decreased the trust you have in the professionals who work with your child? [Tell me about this/these…]
6. Do you tend to trust other people or distrust them? Does it take time for you to develop trust in someone?
7. How much contact have you had with your child’s education professionals? Have you had contact on a regular basis, occasionally, seldom…? Have your interactions been generally positive? Generally negative? Please describe some…
8. Do you think that your cultural background (your race, ethnicity, education, income level) in any way influences your level of trust in others or in education professionals? If so, how?