

## Trust and Maintaining Academic Optimism

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**Abstract:** *This phenomenological study examines the teaching pilgrimage of eleven elementary teachers with varying experience levels from across Montana as they discuss how they have maintained trust despite betrayals by students, colleagues, parents and administrators. Themes emerge from their stories and discussion which have significant impact on how school leaders might better foster collective trust, a key element in Hoy's Academic Optimism, which has proven to significantly improve student achievement even when controlling for SES. From these themes various implications surface for leadership development and further research.*

**Keywords:** *Trust, collective trust, academic optimism*

Over the last 40 years and especially since the Coleman et al.'s (1966) landmark study, educators and researchers have been searching for school climate variables that make a difference for teachers and students, including both cognitive and social-emotional outcomes even when controlling for socio-economic status (SES) (Hoy, 2012). For an extended time, many thought that openness and humanism in school climate were related to student achievement. After using regression equations to account for SES, no significant relationships were revealed between school climate variables and student achievement (Hoy, 2012). As the quest continued to discover what factors, traits, or constructs could account for high academic achievement, a major breakthrough was made in the late 1990's by Wayne Hoy and John Tarter. Hoy and Tarter discovered academic emphasis was positively related to school achievement even after controlling for SES (Hoy, 2012).

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Academic emphasis is the degree to which a school is driven for academic excellence: high achievable goals are stressed; the learning environment is serious; teachers believe in the ability of all students to succeed; and teachers and students alike respect high academic achievers. (Hoy, 2012, p. 80)

Social cognitive theorist, Arthur Bandura (1986, 1997) provided a general framework for understanding motivation and human learning. As a part of this theory self-efficacy is “a person’s belief about his or her capacity to organize and execute actions required to produce a given level of attainment” (Hoy, 2012, p. 83). An entire learning community’s sense of efficacy, or collective efficacy, was found to be positively related to student achievement in addition to academic emphasis when also controlling for SES.

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) identified a third facet, collective trust, which positively correlated with high student achievement when, once again, controlling for SES. Hoy (2012) defines collective trust as “a state in which groups are willing to make themselves vulnerable to others and take risks with full confidence that others will respond in positive ways, that is, with benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness” (p. 80). This construct was further evidenced by Bryk and Schneider (2003) when they performed a longitudinal study of over four hundred Chicago elementary schools and found that trust among teachers, parents, and students produced schools with high student achievement regardless of SES. They coined the term “relational trust.” Both Hoy’s and Bryk and Schneider’s studies revealed the monumental value of trust in schools. More precisely these studies placed trust between teacher and teacher and trust between teacher and parents (which directly corresponded with student trust) at the top of the hierarchy of relational trust, thus creating overlapping school, family, and community spheres of collective influence to maximize student success. Considering this, most teachers agree that parent partnerships contribute to more effective teaching, successful students, and positive school cultures (Hollifield & Epstein, 1996).

After identifying academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and collective trust as climate variables that make a positive difference in student achievement, Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006) identified a new construct. This new construct was termed academic optimism. “A school with academic optimism has a faculty that collectively believes it can make difference, all students can learn, and high academic performance can be achieved” (Hoy, 2012, p. 85). All of the constructs mentioned are invariably woven together and can form a culture of academic optimism in schools. Hence, when schools can achieve a culture of academic optimism student achievement is elevated to a much higher degree even when controlling for SES. It is in this dynamic of academic optimism that we take aim to better understand.

Our research team asked, “What are the underlying dispositions/traits/factors of teachers who seem to have maintained academic optimism?” Primarily focusing on trust we conducted a survey that included 72 teacher participants. Out of the survey group, 11 teachers participated in a focus group. This phenomenological study focuses on the outcomes of analysis of this focus group data. A future study will present outcomes from the survey data. The focus group data revealed several rich and deep insights into how these teachers navigated specific episodes of broken trust throughout their teaching pilgrimage, therefore, enabling them to maintain one of the constructs of academic optimism.

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of how teachers have navigated incidences of broken trust throughout their careers. This qualitative

phenomenological study used thematic analysis to delineate common themes from a one-hour focus group meeting.

When using thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, researchers review their data, make notes and begin to sort it into categories; they continue suggesting that this method is hailed for its flexibility and capacity to surface themes in which it "...captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p.87). They also state not all thematic data can be quantified and its relevance should be deemed important if it captures the essence of the overall research question.

The study was initiated with a survey via Google Docs to teachers throughout Montana. The survey focused on trust with students and parents. The survey window lasted two weeks and seventy-two responses were collected. The survey results were then used to frame the questions for the focus group; as noted above, the data from the survey will be examined in a future study.

The team of six researchers developed questions for the focus group; see Table 1. The focus group was convened in March 2013 using video conferencing software; teachers attended from four locations across Montana. Participation was voluntary and included eleven teachers with assignments in grades K-8. The participants also had varying years of experience ranging from a first year teacher up to teachers with more than 20 years' experience. The participants in the focus group included professionals from traditional education, instructional intervention, and student support services.

*Table 1. Focus Group Questions*

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1.	Please introduce yourself (name, how long you've taught, what subject/grade levels) and please tell us in one sentence why you became an educator?
2.	Can you tell us about a time during your teaching career that challenged how you felt about teaching? Perhaps even made you consider leaving the profession?
3.	How did you move through that time/crisis and how were you on the other side of it compared to before it? Did you hold optimism or hope differently before this time as opposed to how you hold it today?
4.	What has made you decide to stay in teaching?
5.	Parker Palmer has used the comparison of teaching being similar to a relationship or even a marriage in that early on there is all the excitement/passion so often found in a marriage in the early years but over time that passion/excitement can cool or dim but for those relationships that grow and maintain, the heat of passion may grow into a different sort of passion which is a deep and abiding love. He suggests this often happens with teachers - can you relate to this as you think about your teaching pilgrimage and the struggles it has presented you?
6.	Do you think your trust in each of the following groups has changed over time - would you discuss each please? Students: Parents: Administrators: Colleagues:

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The focus group was moderated by one member of the research team and lasted approximately one hour. The remaining five members of the research team attended the focus

group meeting as observers and made field notes throughout. The focus group audio was also recorded for later analysis.

The research team convened two weeks after the focus group was conducted and listened to the recording of the focus group audio. Throughout this session, the recording was periodically halted to engage in extensive discussion regarding the patterns researchers were beginning to notice; from this audio discussion and the field notes taken by the various researchers, participant statements were coded and sorted and thematic strands were surfaced.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are two approaches to thematic analysis: inductive or theoretical. This study used an inductive approach to thematic analysis where the research team identified patterns “without paying attention to the themes that previous research on the topic might have identified” (p. 91). After lengthy discussion amongst the research team and reaching consensus from the focus group audio discussion, the team identified four prevailing themes regarding teacher trust in relation to parents, students, and colleagues.

## FINDINGS

The research team identified four themes from the analysis:

1. Overall, these eleven teachers were positive about their teacher pilgrimage.
2. Teaching colleagues were critical to these teachers’ ability to move through broken trust incidents in their teacher pilgrimage whether that broken trust was with students, parents, administrators or other colleagues.
3. Concerning students, all of these teachers were very positive regarding their overall trust of students.
4. Regarding parents, administrators and colleagues and broken trust, a common refrain was “you get what you get” – this wasn’t a cynical, jaded resignation as much as it was a mature resolution of the reality of working with other broken adults.

Teachers voiced a belief in the innate good of students as people and trust in their students. Realistic feelings were shared explaining that while you cannot fix every student you can provide them with a positive learning environment and solve problems with students. Praise was given in respect to children and their energy and teachers repeatedly voiced, “Students are the most important.” Teachers said students deserve teachers who use best practices and give it their all every day. They expressed that students should not be thought of as a chore but also realize it can be frustrating when they are unable to make progress academically.

Teachers also tend to believe in the personhood of parents as good people and trust in them in general; however, teachers are often frustrated with the lack of support from parents when it comes to academics and behavior. Many teachers expressed the desire for partnerships with parents in their children’s education but have come to the reality that it may not happen with all parents. One teacher expressed this by saying, “You get what you get.” Another teacher said, “We can’t do anything about the parents or other outside factors.” Depending on the parents, contributions to the child’s education vary. Some teachers appeared resigned to the point that parents are beyond their control and have been disheartened when they have trusted them. There seemed to be recognition that parents were critical but partnering was not what they hoped for.

Mixed emotions arose regarding relationships with co-workers and the level of trust they have in them. Feelings of trust in peers range from very strong as expressed in the following quote, “I trust in my team; we will outlast the administration” to very weak as one teacher explained, “I expect my school leader to overpower the lame.”

Many teachers expressed their feelings toward their administrators and explained while they trusted their administrators in the beginning of their relationship, there have been situations that caused a loss in trust. Teachers expect administrative leaders to be listeners and to follow through; indeed, trust is often broken by a lack of follow through. As one participant noted in discussing how to move through broken trust, "I've learned to hold administrators more realistically knowing they're human but the broken trust is hurtful and difficult to get over."

## CONCLUSIONS

According to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (1998) research, there is a growing interest in the importance of trust in interpersonal relationships to well-functioning organizations. Trust in schools is being widely researched and the findings suggest how critical trust in schools is for greater student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002) as well as healthy, balanced interpersonal relationships (Hoy & Sabo, 1998). However, given the nature of interpersonal relationships and varied personality styles in educational institutions, there is a high likelihood each teacher will experience betrayal and, therefore, broken trust at some point in their teaching career. Broken trust or mistrust in school clearly has a relationship to lower student achievement and poorer functioning organizations. Seasoned teachers shared in the focus group about their experience of moving from broken trust, back into trust in their schools. Two basic tenets emerged around the ability to bounce back after broken trust for these teachers:

1. Successful teachers fundamentally rejected being a victim of their circumstances on a long-term basis and ultimately determined their own response to the situation (versus taking on the emotions of others). Teachers in the focus group expressed solid core beliefs in self and in the mission of teaching as their primary reason for their ability to bounce back after a betrayal. As one teacher stated: "I have learned that you cannot win all battles and you just kinda (sic) choose the ones that are worth fighting and you realize that is actually very few and that you cannot fix every kid that comes through your door that you can only provide a safe place for them to learn as much as they can" and "If there is negative going on, I avoid it so I don't see."
2. Consciously moving from an internal state of emotional shutdown to a state of open willingness to collaborate and ask for help from others was the second most shared bounce-back technique from trust betrayal among these focus group teachers. It did not seem to matter in what sort of relationship the betrayal had arisen (i.e. administrators, parents, students or other colleagues). The ability to overcome and heal the broken trust was dependent on warm, collegial support and collaboration. Responses included: "Talking to other teachers helped me through this and gave me strategies," "Knowing that you are not alone," "I learned to collaborate with my staff and really relied on my fellow colleagues to help me through and show me tools that worked in their classroom."

This study confirms that trust can be resilient in personal situations and in school environments where trust has been broken. These findings suggest that both higher student achievement as well as healthier work environments can result as teachers with a range of educational experience work through the inevitable reality of having trust broken and choosing to move back into trust.

## IMPLICATIONS

The conclusions from this study suggest two recommendations for professional development to facilitate trust throughout a teacher's career: intentional commitment to school-wide collegiality and encouraging teacher engagement in parent partnering. The focus group participant data indicated that individual professional trust perseveres when relational trust is present. As the participants responded to questions concerning professional challenges that prompted contemplation of leaving the profession, the majority of teachers responded that they were able to move through their varying difficulties by relying on their grade level team or by searching out colleagues who were willing to collaborate and assist in problem solving.

Considering that Deal and Peterson (2009) stated, "Schools that value collegiality and collaboration offer a better opportunity for the social and professional exchange of ideas, the enhancement and spread of effective practices, and widespread professional problem solving" (p.13), the research team suggests that school leadership maintain a consistent focus on building relational trust with day-to-day social exchanges (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). This involves implementing structures that provide time for teachers to work together, get to know each other, and create a bank of common experiences that allow for strong interpersonal bonds to develop; thus, laying the cornerstones of positive long-term relationships (Graham & Ferriter, 2010).

The second implication for professional development revealed by the focus group data suggested that relationships with parents could result in levels of distrust; therefore, teachers can become satisfied with minimal parent communication, support, and involvement. These participants expressed feelings of being alone without parent support with academics and behavior which suggests the need for professional development in engaging families in parent partnerships. In view of Hoy's (2012) research in this area, collective trust among teachers, parents, and students within schools increases student achievement regardless of socioeconomic status. Sanders and Sheldon (2009) also recommend, "Implementing a partnership program in schools can be an effective strategy for getting more students the kind of support linked to their academic success and well-being" (p. 27).

From this research and recognizing the complexity inherent in parent partnerships, this study encourages school administrators to develop programs that create connections which address Epstein's (1995) six types of family involvement:

1. Parenting- helping all families understand child and adolescent development and establish home environments that support children as students.
2. Communicating- designing and conducting effective two-way communications about school programs and children's progress
3. Volunteering- recruiting and organizing help and support for school programs and student activities
4. Learning at home- providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and curricular related decisions and activities
5. Decision making- including parents in school decisions and developing parent leaders
6. Collaborating with the community- identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students, and their families (as cited in Sanders & Sheldon, 2009).

Trust in schooling is critical; teacher-parent collaboration is critical and important for teacher trust maintenance. Administrators can serve as family engagement deal makers or breakers in understanding family engagement research and leading the charge toward meaningful family collaboration (Mazza, 2013) resulting in teachers willingness to maintain these vital trust

relationships with parents. To fully actualize collective trust among parents, teachers, administrators, and students, it is essential that parent partnership activities be implemented in a coordinated and comprehensive manner.

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