



Trust in Educational Settings: Insights and Emerging Research Questions

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical and empirical foundations of research on trust in education are still weak. To contribute to a better understanding of the role of trust in educational systems, this final article of the special issue “Trust in educational settings. European perspectives” highlights the findings from the contributions in this special issue and links them to insights and concepts from interdisciplinary trust research. Furthermore, it identifies and discusses seven avenues for future research on trust in educational settings. Thus, this paper and the special issue as a whole aim to highlight relevant avenues for future research, thereby strengthening research on trust in education.

Introduction

Trust is an important quality within social relationships. Consequently, various disciplines target trust in different social settings. In educational settings, in particular, the role of trust is subject to a number of open questions. Education is an essential key to social participation, and educational institutions are important socialization instances in which social values and norms are passed on. At the same time, educational processes are subject to many uncertainties due, inter alia, to asymmetrical interpersonal relationships and institutional framework conditions, which often fail to compensate for existing disadvantages. Trust can play an important role in overcoming such uncertainties.

However, both the theoretical and the empirical underpinnings of research on trust in education are still weak. This special issue therefore aims to contribute to a more nuanced and well-informed understanding of trust in education systems, in line with the recent development in interdisciplinary trust research. In particular, it intends to enhance the understanding of trust and trust processes in educational organizations and across different levels of European educational systems. To this end the special issue examines the implications of trust in specific educational settings. The different papers address a broad range of topics, such as the interplay of generalized educational trust and instruments of educational governance, the relationship of governance instruments and trust in educational organizations, and the evolution of trust within educational

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organizations. Ultimately, this special issue seeks to provide directions for future research on trust within multilevel educational systems.

Insights From This Special Issue

Both the consideration of the several notions of trust (Bormann et al., 2022, in this special issue) and providing a well-founded definition of trust in education settings are an essential basis for a meaningful theoretical discussion and appropriate empirical observation. With respect to the various notions of trust, every single paper in this thematic issue has taken a well-articulated and explicit position. The contributions thus stand out from other works in educational science that tend to refer to trust as a global concept. A proper definition of trust has been much discussed across academic disciplines and, as a result, has been defined in many ways (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 711). While this has caused some confusion (Nooteboom, 2012, p. 10), there is also “some considerable convergence on the central elements of trust” (Lewicki et al., 2006, p. 1014; Schilke et al., 2021, p. 253). These elements are also reflected in the articles in this special issue, which deliver examples for specific delimitations of trust in educational settings that might serve as models for future research in this field. Any paper included in this special issue refers to the existence of a specific risk perceived by the trustor, the willingness to be vulnerable, positive expectations toward the trustee’s actions and their outcomes, and different facets of trustworthiness on the part of the trustee.

Building on these elements, the articles also provide some fresh insights that reinforce the need for a more nuanced view of trust and its role in educational settings.

Görlich investigates how vulnerability is involved in re-building trust between teachers and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Interestingly, rather than seeing students as vulnerable, *Görlich* defines students as people in vulnerable positions. In educational settings, such vulnerable positions result from the potential gap between the knowledge young people have and the knowledge they need in order to get involved in education. Vulnerable young NEETs tend to have lower expectations of recognition and of meeting trustful relations in education settings, and to experience a lower degree of belonging in class and in school. As they also tend to blame themselves for their difficulties, they are dependent on a positive response by educational practitioners to their expressions of trust and their need for help. *Görlich’s* analysis thus suggests that educational institutions, rather than focusing solely on students, need to address the interplay between students and teachers.

Attention to differences in vulnerabilities is also raised by *Lerkkanen and Pakarinen*, who investigate the role of parental trust in teachers for children’s academic interest during the early school years. They argue that children who are at risk of low achievement and school failure have more to lose and are more dependent on functioning relationships with teachers. Parents of such children thus need to trust that the teacher will understand the child’s needs and will do their best to educate their child effectively. Their analysis shows that, during the first two years of primary school, parental trust in the child’s teacher positively affected the child’s subsequent interest in math, which, in turn, bolstered parental trust. However, this self-fulfilling circle was only found in children without an at-risk status. In addition, *Lerkkanen and Pakarinen* suggest an interesting effect of active communication by mothers with teachers in the early school years: trust is initially based on an estimation of the teacher’s trustworthiness but evolves into trust based on actual knowledge as the relationships with teachers mature and predictability grows. The authors conclude that pre-service teacher education should include more training in interacting with parents and building trustful educational partnerships.

Parent-school interaction is also at the center of the study by *Bormann, Killus, Niedlich and Würbel*. They argue that trust is developed through interaction and that different forms of interaction as well as different situations affect the perception of trustworthiness in specific ways.

Using a vignette design, Bormann et al. investigate how two types of interaction—parents' evenings and parent-teacher conferences—shape parental expectations regarding different facets of trustworthiness. Their results marked differences between the two types of interaction, which the authors link to different perceptions of risks resulting from the specific characteristics of the two interactions. Compared to parents' evenings, parent-teacher conferences are more direct, asymmetric, prone to error and misunderstandings, and provide fewer opportunities for parents to avoid confrontations with teachers, thus increasing the risk for parents of being criticized and "losing face". Overall, the authors emphasize the need for more parent involvement in school, as this can lead to greater trust, which, in turn, can lead to higher levels of involvement.

In a different vein, *Van Houtte* examines the relationships of faculty trust, student trust in teachers and student motivation. Her results show the positive effect of faculty trust on student motivation, but this only holds for autonomous motivation, not for controlled motivation. In addition, faculty trust impacts motivation through student trust in teachers; the association of faculty trust and autonomous motivation is no longer significant if student trust is accounted for. Van Houtte also investigates the effects of socio-economic student composition on trust and motivation. Interestingly, she finds that students in schools with higher proportions of migrant students "are more autonomously motivated, but this does not manifest fully because faculty trust is lower in these schools producing less autonomous motivation." Faculty trust can thus suppress the positive effect of ethnic composition, which raises the question of how the socio-economic composition of the faculty is linked to teacher trust in different student groups, and demonstrates the need to improve student-teacher relationships.

While the contributions discussed so far focus on the micro level of interactions and trust in educational institutions, *Pol and Lazarová* turn toward the interplay of educational government and trust in educational institutions. The authors analyze the role of trust in the implementation of educational reform, namely of inclusive education. They argue that such reforms require change on different levels, from classrooms and schools to the education system itself. Their analysis reveals the potential of trust to support reform implementation in a number of ways: by mitigating negative interpretations and defensive reactions, by enabling schools and teachers to efficiently use external support systems, by facilitating social exchange (i.e. by the sharing of visions, work methods, fostering mutual support in nonstandard situations), by encouraging delegation, empowerment and experiments and cutting down on control, and by allowing teachers to open up to all pupils and parents. Without trust, change is inhibited and educators feel they can only rely on themselves. Pol and Lazarová maintain that preparedness for disappointment and self-confidence can to a certain degree offset a lack of trust. Ultimately, however, implementation cannot succeed without trust, though interpersonal trust can compensate for a lack of institutional trust, and vice versa.

Education reforms, such as inclusive education, play out differently across different countries. As *Välismaa* argues, teaching and learning take place in specific socio-economic, cultural and political contexts that shape the values, norms and goals of education. In his historical analysis, Välismaa shows that education in Finland has evolved in close connection with the welfare state and is closely linked with high generalized trust and the core values of equality and equity. Trust in public institutions and the professions, including schools and teachers, is high and is reflected in the shared cultural conviction in Finland that the autonomy of teachers and school leaders supports the high quality of teaching and learning. Välismaa strengthens this view by outlining that education has been important in providing opportunities for upward social mobility in Finnish society during the last century.

The importance of contextual, societal-level factors is further substantiated by *Niedlich*. Drawing on analyses of welfare and education regimes, he identifies notable differences across European countries in six dimensions: educational governance, educational expenditure, educational settings, vocational specificity, educational access, and outcomes. These dimensions can be

linked to trust in education via a number of mechanisms, including sub-state autonomy, modes of accountability, public educational spending, the socializing effects of education, pedagogical differentiation, perceptions of being unjustly excluded from education, welfare support for academic low achievers as well as educational and income equality.

Overall, the contributions to this special issue raise a number of themes that warrant consideration in future educational research, including vulnerabilities and risks in educational settings and how these are related to social positions, the evolution of (types of) trust over time, situational specificity of trust, the perceptions, expectations and criteria of trustworthiness, the inter-relationship of trust on different levels of education systems, the role of context, including structural, societal factors, and the need to enable educational institutions to develop trust-promoting behaviors and environments. However, recent advances in trust theory and research point to additional themes that need to be addressed.

Directions for Future Research on Trust in Education

Against this backdrop, we will outline seven avenues that we regard as central for future research on trust in educational settings:

1. Investigating perceived risks and vulnerabilities in education and how they are related to trust
2. Taking account of pre-reflexive trust and its role for educational interaction and outcomes
3. Distinguishing the intensity and range of educational trust
4. Exploring the dynamics of trust development in education
5. Exploring the relationships of trustworthiness, trust and trusting practices in education
6. Understanding the relationship of trust and distrust in education
7. Understanding the role of context for trust in educational settings

Investigating Perceived Risks and Vulnerabilities in Education and How They Are Related to Trust

As Lewicki et al. (2006, p. 1003) state, “When asked whether one trusts or distrusts another, the proper answer is not ‘yes’ or ‘no’ but ‘to do what?’” It seems equally important to ask ‘what are the risks of trusting another?’

Most scholars agree that taking risks and making oneself vulnerable to an individual or institution is inextricably linked to trust, yet it is common for researchers to simply assume risks and vulnerabilities in a rather unspecific manner in their analyses of trust. While it is certainly plausible to assume, for example, that parents take a risk by relying on teachers to understand and act upon their child’s needs, this remains fairly abstract, and a more nuanced understanding of the specific risks and vulnerabilities involved seems to be necessary. This should entail moving beyond a purely individualistic conception of risk and vulnerability and incorporate structural and relational aspects.

Specifically, future research should therefore aim to provide insights into different types of relationships between trustor and trustee (e.g. power asymmetries, sanction options, degree of autonomy), types of interaction (e.g. voluntary/non-voluntary educational interaction; high/low-stakes situation) and types of communication and change processes (e.g. bottom-up, top-down) as well as types of risk (e.g. future-related or present-related risks; risk of reversible or irreversible consequences). In this conjunction, it is crucial to distinguish clearly, whether trustor and trustee are individuals, groups or institutions (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2021) and whether risks and vulnerabilities accrue at the individual, group or institutional level.

What is more, analysis should not be restricted to “objective” risks and vulnerabilities, but also examine what risks people actually perceive and how these perceptions shape their trust. This should include the question of who is seen as responsible for vulnerable positions and desired outcomes. Do vulnerable youth people blame themselves for their difficulties or do they blame teachers and schools? Do teachers shoulder responsibility for implementing educational reform or do they expect external support? Are educational inequalities on the societal level seen as a result of individual performance or attributed to structural disadvantage? Clearly, how people answer such questions will affect how they define risks and grant trust. While such judgments can be analyzed on the individual level, they are also shaped by collective norms and values. Analyzing discursively shared perspectives and expectations about risks, responsibility and trustworthiness at the dyadic, group or societal level might therefore also provide valuable insights.

It is important to note that assessments of risk depend on prior experience, and the “history” of interacting parties may influence whether a situation is framed in terms of loss or gain. For example, sacrifices made in a relationship may be seen “not (...) as bygones that should be ignored in an assessment of future costs and benefits (...) [but] as in vain if one pulls out after incurring them” (Nooteboom, 2003, p. 21). As a result, people might be willing to accept higher risks in a “loss frame” situation. In education, this may be particularly relevant where people enter voluntarily into cooperative arrangements, such as networks among schools or educational practitioners. Having invested time in such networks may lead members in the network to take greater risks and to trust other network members as they try to maintain network relations, whereas members who see exiting the network as a “gain frame” may become risk-averse and exhibit less trusting behavior (ibid., p. 20).

Similar logics could apply to educational partnerships between teachers and parents and to relations between superintendents and schools, although both cases are marked by power asymmetries and, at least in the latter case, non-voluntary interaction, which might be reflected in risk-assessments and trust on both sides.

Taking Account of Pre-Reflexive Trust and Its Role for Educational Interaction and Outcomes

Trust and its foundations are usually not thought about in the course of everyday action—they tend to operate in pre-reflexive modes (Endreß, 2010). This also applies to educational settings, where actors are often not aware if and why they do or don’t trust others. Instead, relationships are shaped by tacit assumptions and habitual ways of interaction (Frederiksen, 2014). Such dispositions are based on experience and socialization. As a result, they vary across social groups, and people “seek out specific experiences while avoiding others on the basis of tastes and preferences usual within their social group” (Frederiksen, 2014, p. 174). This means that mutual understanding and trust across social groups can be difficult, as Van Houtte’s findings (this special issue) on ethnic composition, faculty trust and student motivation as well as other studies (e.g. Bormann & Thies, 2019; Janssen et al., 2012) demonstrate.

Taking account of the role of pre-reflexive trust in educational relationships is therefore crucial for future research. This requires us, inter alia, to consider the socio-economic composition of students as well as of faculty and the interplay of both. Such analysis should center on the implicit expectations of teachers, parents and students, as well as on the foundations of trustworthiness perceptions. Related open questions include: How are such expectations correlated with socio-economic background? What sub-groups of teachers, parents and students can be identified? How far do the expectations of (sub-groups of) teachers, parents and students match? Is a better “fit” of expectations associated with greater (mutual) trust?

Shedding light on these interrelations may encourage educational institutions to reflect on the tacit foundations of trust. Future research in this area could thus provide an opportunity to

address the relationship of pre-reflexive and reflexive trust by examining the situational conditions under which the former turns into the latter and assessing how this transformation affects trusting relationships and actions. Doing so could help to better understand the conditions of teacher well-being, student motivation and, ultimately, educational attainment.

This line of research raises some methodological challenges. Research in education (as in other fields) tends to rely on quantitative surveys to analyze trust. Often these instruments measure trust by explicitly asking respondents to indicate their level of trust in a person (e.g. a teacher) or institution (e.g. a school). However, this approach provides no insight into the expectations and criteria underlying trust and does not therefore provide insights into mechanisms of pre-reflexive trust. Other instruments, such as the scale used by Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999), refer to different facets of trust (benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, openness) instead of addressing trust directly. It has been argued that this approach on the part of Hoy and Tschannen-Moran provides a measure of trustworthiness characteristics rather than of trust itself (Shayo et al., 2021, p. 9). While this raises the question of how to measure trust appropriately, measuring aspects of trustworthiness seems nevertheless to be helpful in shedding light on the foundations of trust.

It must be noted, however, that the existing scales used to measure facets of trust(worthiness) remain on a rather abstract level: For example, the Omnibus Trust Scale (Forsyth et al., 2011) encompasses 26 items measuring faculty trust in the principal, colleagues, and clients (students, parents) that all refer to the school in general, and the scales for student and parent trust are constructed similarly. One way to measure trust closer to real life is the use of vignette studies, as proposed by Bormann et al., 2019 (and Bormann et al., [in this special issue](#)). By including different occasions of, for example, interaction between parents and school, such vignettes can illuminate how these interactions tend to trigger the different facets of trustworthiness to varying extents.

In summary, standardized instruments enable us to measure known aspects of trust or trustworthiness, but they cannot uncover aspects that are still unknown. In addition, it appears unclear how well standardized instruments can actually capture tacit assumptions that are not reflexively available to respondents. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the pre-reflexive foundations of trust in education, research should also draw on qualitative research, in particular on qualitative reconstructive methods which have been designed specifically for the collection and analysis of tacit knowledge (Scheunpflug et al., 2016; on the use of qualitative methods for trust research see also Lewicki et al., 2006, p. 1015).

Distinguishing the Intensity and Range of Educational Trust (in Educational Networks)

Recently, trust scholars have distinguished the level of trust from the radius of trust. While the level of trust can be understood as “the strength of cooperative norms”, the radius of trust refers to “the circle of people among whom cooperative norms are operative” (Delhey et al., 2014, p. 787). Originally, the concept of radius of trust was linked to the distinctions of generalized trust (based on experiences made beyond the realm of familiarity) and particularized trust (based on experiences in the immediate social sphere), and of in-group and out-group trust (Delhey et al., 2014., pp. 790; Freitag & Traunmüller, 2008 ; van Hoorn, 2014). In an alternative approach, Hu (2017) proposes to relate the radius of trust to the strength of interpersonal ties. The radius of trust thus describes the diameter of an individual’s circle of trust across (groups of) partners with differential tie strengths (Hu, 2017, p. 149).

In applying this approach to the field of education, one must take account of the multilevel character of education systems: trusting relationships, and thus circles of trust, play a role on and across different levels (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Application of the concept of the trust radius on different levels of education systems.

Level	Application of the radius of trust concept (examples)
Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circle of trusted educational practitioners, schools (e.g. across own school, district, state/profession in general) • Impact of education on the circle of trusted people across groups with differential strengths of social ties
Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circle of trusted people among actors in school districts, educational collaborative networks or in area-based reforms • Circle of schools, school leaders that superintendents trust
School/educational institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circle of colleagues that educational practitioners trust • Circle of faculty members that educational leaders trust • Circle of people that students trust across student groups (e.g. peers, class, class levels, all students)
Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circle of classmates that students trust • Circle of teachers that students trust • Circle of students, parents that teachers trust

Multidimensional comparative studies are needed in order to understand the development and preconditions of trust radiuses in the field of education. To illustrate this point we take a closer look at the radius of trust in educational networks. Networks have been a popular approach to implementing reforms in the recent past, and trust plays an important role in networks. The burgeoning research on educational networks (e.g. Daly & Finnigan, 2012) sometimes addresses trust issues, but seems to lack a nuanced understanding of the concept. Research into network trust often focuses on dyadic relationships between network members. However, trust also flows through indirect connections and can exist between network members who do not have a direct relationship (McEvily et al., 2021, p. 180). Such “second-hand trust” does not encompass the entire network—it is shaped by the social distance between network members (the number of intermediaries on the shortest path between a potential trustor and trustee) and the strength of first-order (direct) ties to network members (McEvily et al., 2021, p. 188).

It could thus be fruitful to apply the concept of the radius of trust to educational networks. A large radius of trust would extend beyond direct relationships and include indirect ties with different degrees of social distance among actors in educational settings. Using this perspective for the analysis of educational networks could add valuable insights into how individual interactions and social structures in networks interact, and allow members to share risks across larger systems of relationships (McEvily et al., 2021, p. 195), to collaborate efficiently with respect to the quality of interactions and educational outcomes, and to collectively assume leadership at the community or system level (Díaz-Gibson et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2008; Tian & Huber, 2021). Similarly, the concept of the radius of trust could support multidimensional approaches to the analysis of social cohesion in schools (e.g. Veerman & Denessen, 2021).

Exploring the Dynamics of Trust Development in Education

Only recently Schleicher stated that “(w)e know still little about how trust is developed in education and sustained over time, or how it can be restored if broken” (Schleicher, 2021, p. xii). In fact, however, trust is often treated as static and investigated in one-shot surveys. At the same time scholars have repeatedly emphasized the dynamic character of trust (Kramer, 1999; Lewicki et al., 2006; Möllering, 2013; Korsgaard et al., 2018; Lumineau & Schilke, 2018). Pursuing a dynamic perspective on trust in educational settings is not just a matter of paying attention to changes in levels of trust. As shown by Lerkkanen and Pakarinen (in this special issue), the nature of education trust can also evolve over the course of relationships. This finding is in line with developmental models of trust that link trust to stages of relationship development (Lewicki

et al., 2006; McAllister, 1995). For example, Lewicki and Bunker (1996) posit that the basis of trust may move from an initial calculation of costs and benefits resulting from a relationship (calculus-based trust) to knowledge about the other party which makes behavior more predictable (knowledge-based trust), and further to a mutual understanding and an identification with the other's goals and interests (identification-based trust).

The field of education is characterized by repeated interactions between people (e.g. school leaders, teachers, students, parents) over relatively long periods of time. This means that people potentially get to know each other and have similar and shared experiences, which may transform the type of trust that exists between them. Developmental models of trust can help to better understand such trust dynamics. On an even more fundamental level, educational institutions serve an important socialization function. While there is an ongoing discussion among scholars about whether trust is a persistent cultural trait or whether it is shaped by experiential conditioning (Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2018), there is evidence that the experiences students have at school shape their generalized trust in others and in societal institutions (e.g. Abdelzadeh & Lundberg, 2017). However, more research is needed when it comes to understanding how such processes work.

To conclude, research on the dynamics of trust in education should aim at tracking the development of trust over time in order to address issues such as:

- The evolution of generalized interpersonal and institutional trust over the course of a biography;
- The critical role of educational transitions and their effect of trust in educational practitioners and institutions;
- The impact on trust of other critical events in the field of education, such as the abrupt shift to home schooling in response to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- The impact of strategies for promoting trust in educational settings;
- The evolution of professional learning communities and networks in education and their role in, for example, school improvement processes;
- The consequences of educational governance arrangements, such as new forms of accountability or changes in the relationship between central government and local authorities;
- The role of trust and changes in trust in the implementation of educational reforms.

Ideally, research on these issues would include international comparative analyses. Several surveys, such as the World Value Survey or the European Social Survey, periodically measure trust across countries. However, these surveys provide little information about trust in educational institutions. Including such items in international surveys could therefore bolster more in-depth and systematic international comparisons of how trust in education evolves.

Exploring the Relationships of Trustworthiness, Trust and Trusting Practices in Education

Scholars in fields adjacent to education distinguish trust from trustworthiness and from trusting behavior or actions (e.g. Alarcon et al., 2018; Ashraf et al., 2006; Baer & Colquitt, 2018; Colquitt et al., 2007; McKnight et al., 1998; Nooteboom, 2003). At the core of this distinction lies the idea that people's tendency to trust depends on their implicit theory of trust: their expectations of the trustworthiness of others (see also above). Trust and trustworthiness are intricately linked, but it is still important not to mistake one for the other: "having confidence that the other party is trustworthy, and eventually extending trust (risking vulnerability) are two separate processes" (Shayo et al., 2021, p. 9). What is more, trustworthiness and trust need to be distinguished from trusting actions. Cooperating with others, delegating power to subordinates or seeking advice

from others, for example, can be understood as evidence of trust, but these actions are preceded by the trustor's decision to take a risk.

One conclusion from the discussion above is the need to scrutinize more closely what types of vulnerabilities are at play in trusting education relationships. Another is the need to pay more attention to trustworthiness. As also mentioned, educational research can draw on a body of seminal work that has identified different components of trustworthiness, such as benevolence, reliability, openness, competence, and honesty (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999) or ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995).

It is safe to assume that the perception of the trustee's trustworthiness, along with other factors such as the trustor's general propensity to trust, shared goals and expectations, and the nature of the relationship between trustor and trustee, influences the decision to trust (Shayo et al., 2021, p. 12). However, a number of questions remain: What is the relative importance of the different facets of trustworthiness in the context of education? How do different types of situation impact on perceptions of trustworthiness? How do perceptions of trustworthiness change depending on whether trust is placed in a person (e.g. a teacher) or in an institution (e.g. a school or local authority)? How are criteria of trustworthiness reflected in the choice of governance instruments in education? How exactly do perceptions of trustworthiness translate into trusting actions? What kind of actions that provide evidence of trust can be observed in the field of education?

For example, it is unclear whether all facets of trustworthiness are equally important in specific educational settings or relationships, or if some facets have a stronger impact on trust than others. In fact, the weight of the different facets may vary depending on the relationship and the expectations and perceptions associated with it: "Research shows that the student-teacher trust relationship is based on competence (...), fair treatment (...), and care, whilst for parents, it is built on professional relationship, that is reliability, competence, and honesty (...)" (Shayo et al., 2021, p. 11).

It is important to remember that interactions in education take place in highly institutionalized settings. It is therefore to be expected that, for example, the expectations of parents are influenced by institutionalized expectations about the professional role of teachers, which may put a stronger emphasis on some of the facets of trustworthiness, and these facets may have a stronger influence on parent assessment of trustworthiness. Then again, parents may apply different criteria of trustworthiness depending on the specific situation. Future research should tackle the situational specificity of trustworthiness criteria stated here, as this might also apply to interactions and thus to relations of trust between other actors in different educational settings.

Understanding the Relationship of Trust and Distrust in Education

Trust is often referred to in a rather affirmative manner. However, both the "dark side" of trust and distrust in education should also be explored.

While the positive consequences which trust has at different levels of the multi-level system of education are known to be numerous, the potential negative impacts, also labeled the "dark side of trust" (Schilke et al., 2021, p. 252) usually remain under-explored. However, trust can also result in dependency, cognitive deactivation and the threat of manipulation (e.g. Hendriks et al., 2016). In addition, trust can also lead to a situation which is "unwelcome and/or disadvantageous but effectively unavoidable for one or both parties concerned" (Skinner et al., 2014, p. 209) and result in obligations and an "unwelcome burden" (Skinner et al., 2014, p. 218; Neal et al., 2016).

The relationship of trust and distrust is a controversial—and unresolved—topic in trust research (the introduction to this special issue). It has been proposed that trust and distrust are independent constructs that can exist simultaneously, that trust and distrust have different sources, entail different kinds of expectations (positive/negative) and have different consequences (Lewicki et al., 1998, p. 439; Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 394; Six & Van Ees, 2017, pp. 61–64; Van

de Walle & Six, 2014). A conceptual framework for guiding educational research on trust and distrust is needed, yet there is relatively little theoretical and empirical ground to build on.

However, exploring the relationship of trust and distrust in education appears worthwhile, as there is a need to understand the sources of trust and distrust on different levels of the education system, as well as the processes through which trust and distrust emerge and how they interact. For example, research should explore whether public institutional trust and distrust have a spillover effect (Høyer & Mønness, 2016) on educational institutions. For instance, scholars have linked the rise of populism to a decline in public trust in government (e.g., Hosking, 2019). Does this decline translate into lower trust or even mistrust toward educational institutions? And how have the results of international large-scale assessments, such as PISA, impacted on trust and distrust in schools?

Another question relates to the role that trust and distrust play for the choice of governance instruments in education. Following Burns and Cerna, “(t)rust impacts the governance of education systems in a number of ways” (Burns & Cerna, 2016, p. 222). Some scholars found that “bypasses of trust” emerge in the course of the implementation of governance instruments that both result from and affect previously shared values and existing trusting relationships (e.g. between school inspectors and principals; Moos et al., 2016) and can cause distrust (e.g., Høyer et al., 2014). Other observers have argued that the emphasis on accountability and the introduction of monitoring and evaluation in the field of education reflects distrust in educational practitioners and institutions (Bormann & John, 2014; Ehren & Baxter, 2021; Ehren et al., 2020; Paulsen & Høyer, 2016; Høyer et al., 2014; Moos & Paulsen, 2014). Conversely, the fact that Finland has no system of school inspection, standardized tests or school rankings have been linked to high public trust in the profession of teachers (Välilmaa, in this special issue). Similarly, Gray and Weir (2014) argue that teacher education in Scotland has retained a high degree of public and political trust due to the continuing desire for cooperation among key stakeholders.

Issues of trust and distrust could also be of particular relevance in educational settings when actors from different organizational and professional backgrounds interact, such as in professional learning communities or collaborative educational networks, and in contexts where people feel they have to rely on themselves instead of receiving the support they need. Examples from this special issue include vulnerable young people (Görlich) and teachers in the implementation of educational reform (Pol and Lazarová).

Understanding the Role of Context for Trust in Educational Settings

It has been well noted that trust depends on the conditions of interaction between trusting parties (Nooteboom, 2003, p. 7). Understanding the role of context appears of particular importance in education, as many (formal) educational processes take place in the highly institutionalized environment of hierarchically organized systems, and the prior discussion has touched upon a number of contextual factors. To conclude, we now take a systematic look at the role of context.

To this end, it is important to clarify our understanding of “context”. Context can be treated as “external” conditions that have to be controlled in order to ensure the validity of empirical research findings. While this is certainly necessary in some cases, we believe that contextual factors can also deliver causal explanations by focusing on how different aspects of context influence trust in education (Niedlich, 2022, in this special issue). This means that research should not take context as static, but define relevant aspects of contexts based on the specific research interest and theoretical frameworks (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2018). This underlines the importance of not generalizing empirical results too much and too quickly. Instead, research should aim at explaining how trust evolves in different relationships and under different circumstances.

Depending on the specific research interest, context in education can refer to different levels of analysis. In order to guide research, we have introduced a comprehensive model of trust in

Table 2. Possible aspects of context for the analysis of trust in education.

Level	Aspects of context
System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generalized interpersonal and institutional trust • Attitudes toward education (OECD, 2018) • Culturally specific norms and values (Li, 2008)
Educational governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political legitimacy, degree of corruption (e.g., Frederiksen et al., 2016) • Sub-state autonomy • Autonomy of educational institutions • Systems of accountability • Educational collaborative networks • Support systems
Educational institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student and faculty composition • Organizational culture • Leadership
Interactions in educational settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of interaction • Situational characteristics • Asymmetries of power

education (Niedlich et al., 2021). In line with this model, a preliminary set of contextual aspects can be identified at four levels of analysis: education system, educational governance, educational institutions, and interactions in educational settings (see Table 2).

For future research, multidimensional comparative approaches seem particularly promising in terms of analyzing contextual influences on trust in education, especially in an international perspective. Such research would benefit from being able to draw on frameworks that compare major characteristics of educational systems and shed light on similarities and differences across countries. However, despite the rise of international large-scale assessments, no generally accepted framework exists. In this special issue, Niedlich proposes to use typologies of welfare and education regimes as a basis for cross-country comparison, and it appears worthwhile to follow up on this conceptual approach.

Conclusion

It is our view that the study of trust in education holds great potential, but its promises remain largely unfulfilled so far. This article, and the special issue as a whole, aims to offer some theoretical clarifications, raise open questions and provide guidance for trust research that is coherent, connected to current findings and relevant to theory, practice, and policy in education. Hopefully the directions provided can inspire more in-depth studies on trust in (international comparative) educational research, and that these studies will contribute to creating positive educational relationships for all.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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