



A Grounded Model of How Educators Earn Students' Trust in a High Performing U.S. Urban High School

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Abstract

This article presents a grounded model of how educators earn students' trust in a high performing U.S. urban high school. This long-term anthropological project set out to understand the beliefs and practices of experienced teachers and staff members nominated by students as helping them feel like they belonged in school. Analysis of study data revealed a process of *mutual discernment* whereby adults and young people were reading one another as they explored the possibilities of entering into learning partnerships. For the educators, study data led us to infer that their trust building strategies were largely based on imagining the student discernment process, and responding to a set of unspoken queries about them that, over time, they seem to have learned were often on the minds of students (e.g. “Why are they here?” “How much do they respect me?”). The grounded model and practice-based evidence presented here summarize the strategies and approaches educators used to respond to these unspoken queries and communicate to students various aspects of their selves and their stance, including their motivation, empathy and respect for students, self-awareness and credibility, their professional ability, and finally, their commitment to helping students and investing emotional labor in them. Throughout, data are also presented regarding how students perceived and experienced these strategies, and ultimately how they interpreted and appraised their relationships with educators, as trusting relationships were developed.

Keywords Student–teacher relationship · Student–teacher trust · Practice-based evidence · Ethnography · Anthropology

Student–teacher relationships have increasingly been identified as a critical factor in student learning and academic success. Effective student–teacher relationships involve substantial trust. Trust in teachers is also a necessary precursor to students'

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acquisition of certain social emotional learning factors, such as school belonging, and ultimately academic engagement (Pianta et al., 2012, p. 369). Recent research has documented the consequences of lack of trust for especially students from racialized backgrounds, and how it is that they develop “mental models of trust” with teachers (see Yeager et al., 2017). Much of the research to date in this area has been based on short-term intervention studies and surveys. However, an emerging line of inquiry has been balancing this literature by examining in-school processes related to the development of student–teacher trust (see Bishop, 2013; Brake, 2020; Phillippo, 2012; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). This article seeks to contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship on student–teacher relationships by drawing on practice-based evidence to identify educators’ strategies for gaining students’ trust.

Data reported here are drawn from a long-term anthropological study of school improvement in a high-performing U.S. urban high school. A substudy sought to investigate the following research questions: *What key noncognitive factors underlie the academic success of high-achieving minority students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds? How have these high-achieving students acquired these key noncognitive skills and dispositions?* The substudy consequently focused on understanding the beliefs and practices of experienced teachers and staff members who had been nominated by students as helping them develop components of “academic mindsets” (such as school belonging, resilience, confidence, future orientation, and agency). The biggest surprise of the study was how much time, thought, and effort these teachers put into compelling students to trust them. Consequently, a secondary phase of data analysis revealed a rich set of teacher beliefs and practices oriented around gaining trust, as well as student appraisals of these efforts. The approach taken here focuses on the everyday practices of these teachers, and uses the tools of interpretive science to achieve a high degree of ecological validity (Murphy, 2013; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The research contextualizes these staff members’ beliefs and practices in distinct and powerful aspects of the school’s shared emotion culture (see Demerath, 2018; Demerath and Revsbeck, 2019).

Study findings suggest that trust develops from multiple dimensions of interpersonal relationships between educators and students, from the first moments of interaction onward. The grounded model that emerged from the data analysis identifies constituent elements or building blocks of trust that both matter to students, and that educators have found to be effective in relationship building. These building blocks include educator motivation; how educators show their empathy and respect for students, their self-awareness and credibility, and how they demonstrate their professional ability and commitment to students. The model also includes specific strategies that educators used to demonstrate each element of trust, and wherever possible, how students interpreted and appraised them (see Osher et al., 2020). As a whole, then, the model offers a grounded explanation of how trusting relationships between students and educators arise in a typical U.S. urban educational context.

School Success Starts with Student–Teacher Relationships

Recent research has shown that the relationships young people establish with adults in school are central to their school success and healthy development (Aspen Institute, 2019; Catalano et al., 2004; Pianta, 1999). The importance of relationships has been further underscored by the on-line learning mandated by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. In a University of Minnesota survey conducted in June, 2020, the most frequently cited worry expressed by over 15,000 educators across the state was relationship building and “the ability to socially connect and engage with students and families” (Gibbons & Pekel, 2020). Student–teacher relationships also powerfully mediate academic engagement – which may be understood as a “contextualized process mediated by relationships and interpersonal interactions” (see Pianta et al., 2012, p. 369). Researchers have found that even modest attempts by teachers to connect with adolescent students and make them feel “known,” can enhance student motivation in school (Roeser et al., 1998; Skinner et al., 1998). Roorda et al.’s (2011) meta-analysis of research on student–teacher relationships found that positive affective student–teacher relationships are associated with stronger academic engagement and school success. Teacher–student relationships ranked 11th ($d=0.72$) in Hattie’s (2008) meta-analysis of factors related to student achievement.

Student–teacher relationships also impact belonging in school – especially for students from racialized groups who often must cope with negative stereotypes in school and are often “vigilant for cues that could communicate they do not belong” (Walton et al., 2012, p. 2; see also Green et al., 2016). Indeed, Walton’s team found that even brief social belonging interventions can have “profound effects on stereotyped students’ perceptions of belonging,” which then mediate their academic engagement, motivation and success (2012). Gray and his colleagues have demonstrated the importance of incorporating race-based perspectives in efforts to enhance belonging in schools (Gray et al., 2018). They mobilized Eccles and Midgley’s “stage-environment fit theory” to explain how the school belonging of racialized minority students tends to decline across the transition to middle school. Their research also showed, however, that students tend to make progress in areas in which they experience a sense of belonging (2018). Indeed, Brooms’ recent research showed how one of the key components of the “critical mentoring” which Black and Latino males undertook with local middle schoolers and high school students of color was using a “person first” approach which demonstrated “care for the whole person” (2021, p. 210). At a deeper level, McKinney de Royston and her colleagues have shown how some Black educators create belonging through a process of “politicized caring” which intentionally seeks to “protect Black children from racialized harm” (2021, p. 71).

The National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development has responded to these and other research findings by recently recommending that learning settings be transformed so that they “foster strong bonds among children and adults” (The Aspen Institute, 2019, p. 2). However, Eccles and Roeser (2011) have pointed out how the organization of secondary schools can make it

difficult for students to “form a close relationship with any school-affiliated adult precisely at the point in development when there is a great need for guidance and support from nonfamilial adults” (p. 233). Indeed, in their review of research on student–teacher relationships and academic engagement, Pianta et al. (2012) concluded that classrooms have “underperformed” as environments that promote and enhance youth development and engagement, and that classroom need to be further modified as “relational settings” (see pp. 367–369). An important part of the challenge here is that the efficacy of classroom relationships is related to how young people “appraise and interpret” them (see Osher et al., 2020, p. 1).

Such an emphasis on student sense-making is found in Wallace and Chhuon’s study of how students’ interpretations of instructional interactions mediated their academic engagement and “assent to learn” (2014). Another key example is Russell Bishop’s ground-breaking research in New Zealand, which viewed the student–teacher relationship through a local culturally responsive lens (2013). Back in the United States, it is promising that certain education advocacy organizations have been developing resources aimed at helping educators establish more effective relationships with youth (see Innocent Classroom, 2018; Search Institute, 2020).

One area in which these efforts often focus is empathy in teaching. In this light, Conklin (2008) turns to the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who explains in his book “Interbeing” that compassion is actually understanding:

When we grow a lemon tree, we want it to be vigorous and beautiful. But, if it isn’t vigorous and beautiful, we don’t blame the tree. We observe it in order to understand why it isn’t growing well. Perhaps we have not taken good care of it. We know it is funny to blame a lemon tree, but we do blame human beings when they are not growing well... (in Conklin, pp. 30-31).

Trust, “Trust Discernment,” and Student “Mental Models of Trust”

Trust, and in particular relational trust, has been identified as the “connective tissue that holds improving schools together” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; see also Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; and Van Maele et al., 2014). At the classroom level, a growing body of research is shedding new light on the role of student–teacher trust in establishing an effective “learning partnership” (Hammond, 2014) or “developmental alliance” (Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). Student–teacher trust has been shown to be associated with attendance and academic achievement (Allensworth & Easton, 2007), and with positive school adjustment among early adolescent students of color from low-income backgrounds (Murray, 2009). Phillippo’s research on how schools “enact policies of personalism,” showed that teaching practices informed by culturally-responsive pedagogy and relational trust promoted student–teacher relationships. Importantly, Phillippo concluded that teachers who initiated strategies that were perceived positively by students at the beginning of the year were likely to be regarded by students as trustworthy at the end of the year (2012).

Most recently, Brake’s qualitative research in Chicago found that students tended to trust teachers who, from the beginning of the year: (1) Showed flexibility,

understanding, and patience with inconsistent student classroom behaviors, (2) led classroom activities and developed classroom norms and expectations that strengthened classroom teacher and student relationships, and 3) frequently used classroom conferencing to build rapport, assess and monitor learning, open lines of communication, and differentiate instruction (2020, p. 286).

Yeager et al (2017) took a more social psychological approach to understanding the development of trust, and developed a “socio-developmental model of trust discernment” among minoritized adolescent youth (p. 658? – check). Like much of the research discussed here, a strength of their model is that it incorporates student sense-making – specifically, “inductive reasoning on the basis of interpersonal interactions” (p. 668). Yeager et al.’s study focused on how students’ “mental representations” (e.g. of institutional trust) were developed and how they created “social reality,” for the students, “propelling effects forward in time” (p. 668). This is akin to how anthropologists acknowledge that the cultural construction of meaning has a “force” to it and actually directs action or practice (see Peacock, 1986). Yeager’s team found that their interventions involving a “timely and credible show of respect” with a single teacher in 7th grade, set in motion an “alternative process,” and had a positive effect on discipline in the 8th grade and beyond (p. 659). They concluded that “mental models of trust” can serve as protective factors for racialized youth in school (p. 668). They further point out that “wise” educators weave messages that their students are capable, valued, and respected, into the culture of their classrooms.

Overall, this body of literature has illuminated the importance of several aspects of trust-building in student–teacher relationships: teachers establishing classroom-wide supportive norms and positive climate; teachers communicating clearly and early messages regarding their own trustworthiness to students; and teachers ensuring that these messages are empathetic and respectful, because ultimately, their effectiveness will depend on how students perceive, appraise and act on them. This article furthers interdisciplinary research on the formation of effective student–teacher relationships by identifying the strategies through which educators earn students’ trust in an actual school.

As is the case with other naturalistic research, the contribution to the existing literature of these ethnographic findings drawn from everyday practices is vital for educational improvement in that it presumes an “interdependence that ultimately exists between these forms of intelligibility” (see Dominguez, 2012, p. 23). Following the precepts of Latour’s critical sociology, it seeks to “reassemble the social” by “tracing the associations” between the particular social ties and social forces that are implicated in student-educator trust building. Accordingly, the grounded model of how educators earn students’ trust reveals the “inner logics” between these constituent elements (see Latour, 2005, pp. 5–7). Finally, the practice-based evidence presented here is meant to support and guide the creative efforts of local practitioners and leaders as they seek to help all students feel like they belong in school.

Research Setting, Design and Methods

The study was set in Harrison High School (HHS), on the East Side of River City – a large mid-western metropolitan area. (Pseudonyms are used for all place names and participants throughout the article). The East Side was the most densely populated part of the city, and one that had been socioeconomically challenged for several decades. According to U.S. Census data, in 2018, the median household income of area residents was \$50,193, and 22.3% of residents lived in poverty. At the time of the study, Harrison was the largest Title I grade 9–12 in the state, with 83% of its students eligible for free and reduced lunch (in the six other large comprehensive high schools in River City Schools (RCS), 73% of students, on average, were eligible for free and reduced lunch). The school's student demographics were representative of the district, though it served a sizable Southeast Asian student population (primarily Hmong and Karen), whose families had been settling in this part of the city since the 1970s: Asian / Pacific Islander (61%); Black, not Hispanic (19%); Hispanic (11%); White (8%); Alaskan / Native American (1%). 82% of the teachers and 73% of the school staff at Harrison were white. HHS was selected for the study largely because of its steady improvement trajectory, and superior ratings on district student survey items. As such, we expected to find there a variety of innovative informal and formal practices that have helped students develop components of “academic mindsets.” In the first year of the study the River City Schools Superintendent referred to Harrison as a “beating the odds” high school.

The project was designed as an ethnographic case study in order to understand the everyday processes through which students do, or do not, acquire critical components of “academic mindsets” (Fetterman, 2010; Hymes, 1996; Peltó & Peltó, 1978). Peter and Sara carried out the data collection for the project. Both of us are European American and have teaching experience in public high schools. Eskender, who identifies as a second generation Ethiopian immigrant, and Bo, who identifies as African American, have teaching experience in higher education, and assisted with the review of literature and framing for the article. A diverse sample of seven seniors from the class of 2014 were interviewed at the end of their senior year; and another diverse sample of eight seniors from the class of 2015 were interviewed at the end of their junior and senior years (participant details are provided below). Participating students were identified in consultation with Sam Fitzpatrick, the school's testing coordinator and director of the school's College and Career Readiness Center (CCC), who had access to student course assessments and standardized test scores. For the class of 2014 we asked for a diverse sample of students who had “succeeded beyond their current profile” in order to identify key social supports during high school. For the class of 2015 we asked for a stratified sample of high and under-achieving students. The students were equally male and female and were representative of the major racial/ethnic groups of HHS.

The primary focus of the interviews was for students to take a retrospective look back over their school career to identify when, where, and how they

developed critical social emotional learning factors—including school belonging, confidence, future orientation, and the belief that hard work and effort pay off. We asked these students to identify a teacher or other staff member at Harrison who had helped them acquire some of these skills. While most student participants identified one teacher or staff member, Anna Vandenberg identified three and Paj Vang identified two. Mr. Fitzpatrick was identified by four of the focal students, likely because of his critical influence in helping them to navigate the college and financial aid application process. This process yielded a diverse group of 11 focal educators with an average of 13 years of professional experience – the vast majority at Harrison. Several of the focal educators also led specific extracurricular activities (see Table 1). (We refer to the larger group of staff participants as “educators,” then more specifically by role throughout the text.) At this point we should also mention that though Miguel and Camila, two of the under-achieving students, each identified a staff member that supported them, interviews later revealed that they both struggled to establish relationships with other staff members and achievement-oriented peers – they often skipped school and struggled to meet their graduation requirements.

We then requested interviews with the group of focal educators and conducted at least two visits of at least 48–60 min to their classroom or office to observe their interactions with students (due to scheduling limitations, two staff members were visited only once). During these observations, we paid specific attention to how the teachers and staff members messaged (both verbally and nonverbally) to students that they belonged in their classrooms and at Harrison. Following the visits, we conducted at least two 30–60 min interviews with each focal educator. Interview questions sought to capture educators’ teaching philosophies, beliefs about students, and practices for promoting belonging and engagement. In addition, the original study design called for interviews with parents or caregivers of the students from the class of 2015. These proved exceedingly difficult to arrange, however, and we were only able to conduct two. Therefore, the absence of voices and experiences of parents is a limitation of the study. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Overall, the article draws on the following data corpus:

- A total of 45 recorded interviews: 23 with HHS students and 22 with focal educators.
- Over 450 pages of elaborated fieldnotes based on observations and informal conversations in classrooms, hallways, staff and district meetings, and school events.
- River City Schools 2014–2015 Senior Survey results. 352 out of Harrison’s 375 graduating seniors took the survey which asked students to “rate their satisfaction with various aspects of school on a scale of 1 to 4 on the following scale: (1=Strongly Agree; 2=Agree; 3=Disagree; 4=Strongly Disagree). Harrison’s survey responses are compared with the 6 other large comprehensive high schools in the district (River City Schools, 2015).
- School documents including course syllabi, student achievement records, student college admission essays, and meeting notes.

Table 1 Focal participants

Staff participants (nominated by students)			
Name	Position	Race/Ethnicity	Prof. Exper
Sam Fitzpatrick	Counselor	Euro. American	11
Juliana Johnson	FACS Teacher	Euro. American	14
Robert Hill	Cultural Liason	African American	12
Andrea Lopez	Counselor	Latina	3
Steve Swensson	Math Teacher/Girls' Golf Coach	Asian / Euro. American	6
Mary Padden	Science Teacher	Euro. American	15
Cliff Anderson	Math Teacher	Euro. American	20
Robert Driver	Video Prod. Teacher/Drumline	Native / Euro. American	20
Roberta Hawk	English Teacher/Nat. Honors Soc	Euro. American	14
Rebecca Fletcher	English Teacher	Euro. American	19
Jessie Richardson	Science Teacher	Euro. American	13
Student participants (Class of 2014)			
Name	Race/ethnicity	Initial Ach. Level	
Josephine Chue	Asian American (Cambodia)	High	
Wendy Pha	Asian American (Cambodia)	High	
Anna Vandenberg	European American	High	
Tyler Rose	African American	Under	
Mua Chao	Asian American (Cambodia)	Under	
Li Fang	Asian American (Cambodia)	Under	
Abeke Obiakaezi	African American (Nigeria)	Under	
Student Participants (Class of 2015)			
Name	Race / Ethnicity	Initial Ach. Level	
Paj Vang*	Asian American (Cambodia)	High	
Alecia Green	African American	High	
Roberto Perez-Hernandez	Latino (Mexico)	High	
Truth Thompson	African American/Euro. Am	High	
Claire Dunlap*	Euro. American	High	
Khadra Duale	African American (Somalia)	Under	
Richard Tucker	African American	Under	
Miguel Rocha	Latino (Mexico)	Under	
Camila Garcia	Latino (Mexico)	Under	
Krista Whiteeagle**	Native American	Under	

*Parent interviewed

**Left Harrison and matriculated in a different RCD school for senior year

All observational and interview data were analyzed and interpreted through an inductive process of constant comparison across and within cases (Erickson, 1986; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using NVivo software, the process yielded distinct sets

of confirmatory data segments which were coded as key themes and patterns. Discrepant or negative cases were coded as well. After the initial round of open coding revealed a rich set of beliefs and practices around building trust, an additional cycle of theoretical sampling and axial coding of data segments was undertaken to explicate and conceptualize them (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Evidentiary warrants for key assertions were established by triangulating among: (1) elements of student-educator trust that students identified as being important to them and that had made a critical difference in their relationship with particular educators; (2) elements of trust mentioned by educators as part of their relationship-building strategies with students; and (3) specific examples of these strategies as they were enacted or described by educators in their classrooms or offices. Wherever possible, specific student-identified elements of trust are presented in the text with the corresponding strategies and/or practices of the educator they identified.

Overall, the ethnographic case study design allowed for grounded theory building and the development of an empirically grounded conceptual model (Glazer & Strauss, 1967). The approach enables the identification and elaboration of relationships and shaping influences that are not well-defined in the literature (see, e.g., Maylor et al., 2008; Ranft & Lord, 2002). We do want to point out that one possible limitation of the study is our inference that an educator's practice that is received well by one student is likely evaluated positively by other students.

Study findings were contextualized in the lead author's overarching study of Harrison's improvement culture summarized below (see Demerath, 2018; Demerath and Revsbeck, 2019). Throughout the text, extended quotations are identified as having been recorded in fieldnotes or in formal interviews which were recorded. Brackets ([]) mark text that has been inserted for clarification. Three ellipses (...) indicate a pause in the dialogue. Four ellipses indicate that a segment of protocol has been omitted. Italics indicate an emphasis of the speaker.

Socioeconomic Context: Students' Shared Expectations That Things will not "Work Out"

At the outset, it is important to contextualize our findings in key shared beliefs that seemed to circulate among many young people on the East Side. As we began interviewing the focal students, we were struck by how many of them seemed to have very limited appraisals of their own future horizons. Most of them faced considerable financial challenges at home. Alyssa said, "Money is always a problem." She worked as a hostess at a local Mexican restaurant for her final two years of high school – sharing her paycheck with her Dad. Many East Side parents depended on the household income from their children's jobs. When Jalen Lee turned 16 during his junior year, his mother had just left her job and was struggling to find a new one. On his birthday, he said, "Instead of going out and having party, I went to get a job and applied right on the spot for jobs so we could have money and a house." Many Harrison students also provided substantial care for siblings, parents, and especially older relatives.

As the focal students looked back over their high school careers, they generally reported that they were motivated to do well in school by family members, many of whom had sacrificed for them, or not had the same educational opportunities in their own lives. However, as they entered high school, they seemed to have limited expectations for their own educational and occupational success. Josephine Chue, a senior from the Class of 2014, said, “Raised with hot dogs and you know, nothing too fancy. I mean we get caught in the cycle that we don’t think that there’s very many opportunities out there....” Cynthia Chavez said there were many students at Harrison who, “I don’t think that they think it’s going to work out.... [and they] stay in the East Side.” The voices and experiences of Harrison focal students and staff strongly suggested that their biggest internal barrier to embarking on college and career pathways was the deeply seated expectation that things would not work out for them.

Accordingly, the academic mindsets portion of the study set out to explore how staff members at the school helped students overcome these limited self-expectations and develop, in their words, a “new framework” with stronger beliefs in their own capabilities, an ability to imagine a positive self in the future, and enhanced agency. A grounded model of this framework is presented elsewhere (see Demerath et al., in preparation). But first, these educators knew, they had to gain students’ trust.

School-Wide Influences on Student–Teacher Relationships

Harrison itself had certain key characteristics that influenced the process of trust-building between students and teachers. Early in the study, the principal, John Berry, a European American, said that a key challenge for the school since he had arrived in 2007 was “increasing parent support.” He knew that stronger partnerships with parents, caregivers and the surrounding community would likely have an effect on student belonging in school (see Khalifa, 2018). He explained, however, that slow progress in this area had become an impetus for staff “claiming ownership of the school,” and focusing on building an in-school culture of collaboration and supporting student success.

Seven years later, at the time of the study, Harrison had seen impressive gains on student standardized test scores for several years in a row. A broader analysis of the school’s improvement culture undertaken by the lead author revealed a set of key emotionally charged shared meanings that guided its priorities, practices and direction. These included *empathy* for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, *optimism* in their capabilities, and *motivation* to help them learn and flourish. Taken together, these charged meanings comprised the school’s positive “emotion culture” (Demerath, 2018; Demerath and Revsbeck, 2019).

Almost all of the focal students repeatedly emphasized the importance of having positive supportive relationships with staff as the critical factor in their feeling that they belonged at the school. Truth Thompson said, “Having those relationships with the teachers has really gotten me engaged in school. You know, I’ve really been like, wanting to go to school as opposed to feeling like I have to.”

Indeed, the RCS Senior Survey findings suggested the building school belonging and student–teacher relationships were key school-wide strengths at Harrison. 95% of Harrison seniors either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “I feel that I am a part of this school” (96% of Asian/Pacific Islander students either strongly agreed or agreed; 91% of Black (not Hispanic) student either strongly agreed or agreed; 92% of Hispanic students either strongly agreed or agreed; and 100% of White students either strongly agreed or agreed) – ranking Harrison first among the seven RCP large comprehensive high schools (the six other schools’ average on this item was 88%). Similarly, 96% of Harrison seniors either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “There is at least one adult in this school that I can talk to, and that knows me well” (96% of Asian/Pacific Islander students either strongly agreed or agreed; 94% of Black (not Hispanic) student either strongly agreed or agreed; 100% of Hispanic students either strongly agreed or agreed; and 100% of White students either strongly agreed or agreed) – also ranking Harrison first among the seven RCP large comprehensive high schools (the six other schools’ average on this item was 89%).

Building the Grounded Model: Mutual Discernment between Educators and Students

Indeed, study data showed that Harrison educators put substantial thought, time and effort into establishing their credibility and value to students. Hammond (2014) refers to this as part of a teacher’s “stance,” which students read and respond to. The focal staff members knew that students were constantly seeking to discern their stance – especially when they first met them. Sam Fitzpatrick said he thought that students decide in the first three minutes or so of a class “whether a teacher is going to help them and whether they should listen to them.” The focal staff members frequently talked about the importance of building relationships with students. Cliff Anderson was candid about this:

Part of the process is, you know, every, whatever, five years you’ve got a new initiative.... I mean, I don’t buy into every new thing we do, ultimately what works, you know, getting to know the kids is what works.... All that other crap is fluff - it changes all the time. (Interview 5/19/15)

Interpretation of educator and student interview data revealed a process of *mutual discernment* whereby adults and young people were reading one another and exploring the possibilities of entering into learning partnerships. For the educators, study data led us to infer that their trust building strategies were based on imagining the student discernment process described by Hammond and Yeager, and responding to a set of unspoken queries about them that, over time, they seem to have learned often on the minds of students as they interact with them both individually and as part of a class. These unspoken student queries include: *Why are they here? How much do they know and care about me? How much do they respect me? How real are they? Do they know how to help me learn? How close are they willing to get to me? What are they willing to do to help me?* The student queries, educators’

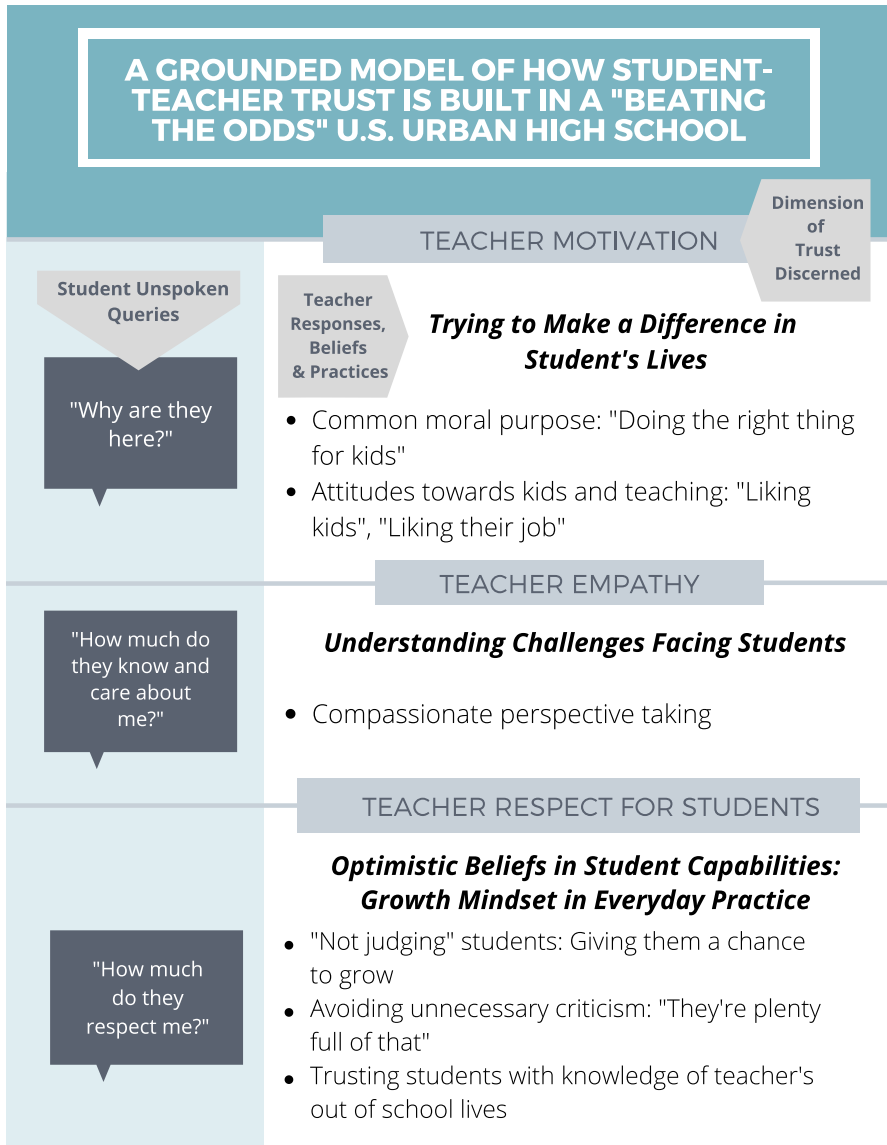


Fig. 1 The grounded model

strategies to respond to them, and how they constitute local elements of trust, form the basis for the grounded model of trust-building presented in Fig. 1.

The model and the practice-based evidence that follow summarize the strategies and approaches staff members used to respond to these unspoken queries and communicate to students various aspects of their selves and their stance,

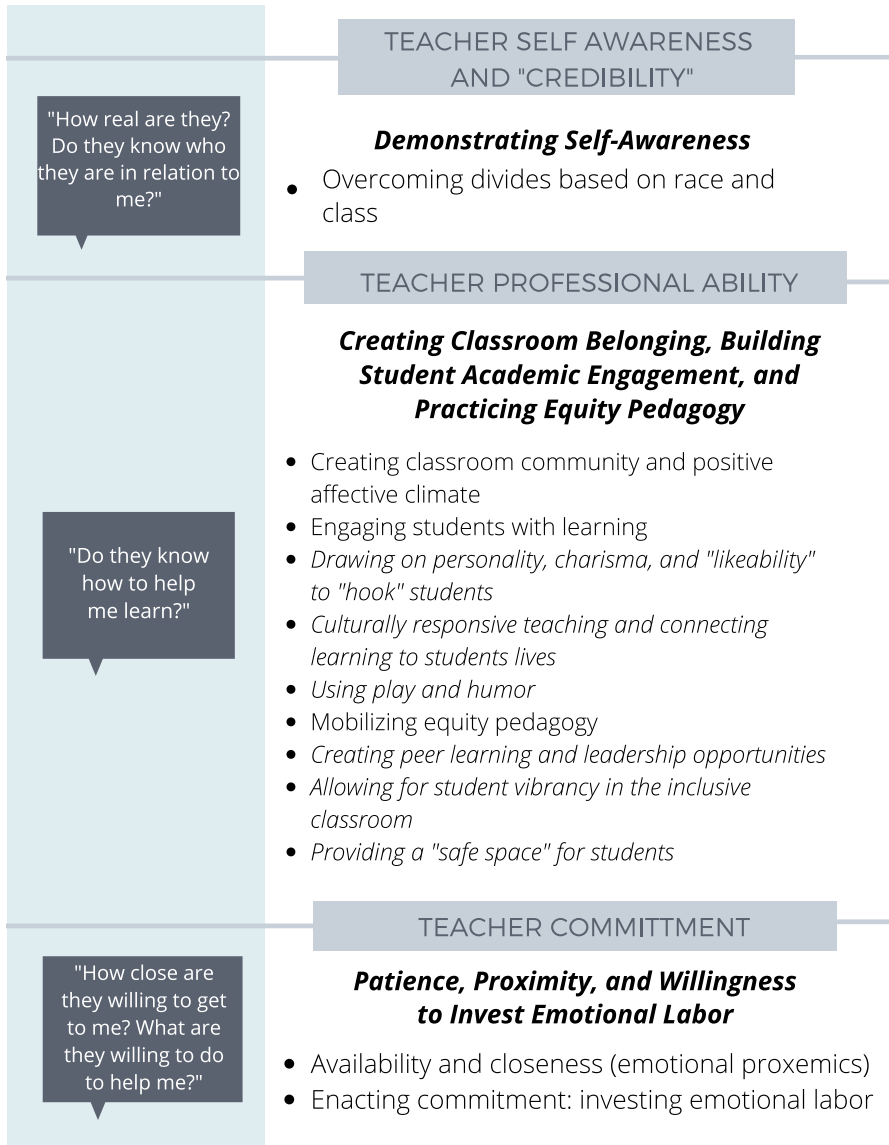


Fig. 1 (continued)

including their motivation, empathy and respect for students, self-awareness and “credibility,” their professional ability, and finally, their commitment to helping students and investing emotional labor in them. Throughout, data are also presented regarding how students perceived and experienced these strategies, and

ultimately how they interpreted and appraised their relationships with teachers, as trusting relationships were developed.

Discerning Teacher Motivation: Trying to Make a Difference in Students' Lives

Why Are They Here?

One of the most important things students wanted to know about their teachers was their motivation—why they were there, and what drove them. Were they just there to collect a paycheck? When asked about this, the most commonly cited professional motivation for the Harrison focal staff members was “making a difference” in students' lives. Rebecca Fletcher said she was motivated by “making sure the students get the education they need and deserve.” Robert Hill was more specific:

I've found it to be very powerful... lives you can change... How many lives have you touched to change and make it better, have you made this place better than when you inherited it? (Interview 5/33/15)

Teachers' Attitudes towards Kids and Teaching: “Liking Kids,” “Liking their Job”

All of the focal staff members either said or made it clear that they liked kids and liked being around them. This was palpable in their classes, in their smiles, the stories they told, and how they interacted and often joked with students. Mary Padden said,

Well, I couldn't do this job if I didn't really like them, you know what I mean? Like, I really do like them. There are days that they drive me crazy! And I think what am I doing? But I do really like them.” (Interview 5/5/15)

Khadra Duale said she thought teachers “should enjoy their job.” However, she and other focal students did describe Harrison teachers who did not have such positive dispositions towards students and teaching. Khadra described a teacher who:

.... Had the same tone when he talks the whole time and it's just like – he looked like he just didn't want to be here.... Put some joy in your tone! ... I guess you could say it throws off people. Because hearing that it just irritates some kids because they think you don't even care, you're just here to get a paycheck.... (Interview 5/28/15)

Subtle cues, such as the tone of a teacher's voice, sent powerful messages to students about their attitude and motivation, all of which seemed to bear on how much they were worthy of students' trust.

Discerning Teacher Empathy: Compassionate Understanding of Challenges Facing Students

How Much do They Know and Care about Me?

One of the key findings of the study was that all of the Harrison focal teachers had various ways of empathizing with students. Staff members often commented on what they had learned about the challenges students faced out of school. Bill Driver said, “I’ve been here 20 years, and a lot of these students, they really don’t have much.” Robert Hill said he frequently heard students say, “we have no food in the house” (he kept a “snack store” in a storage closet in his office where students could buy various inexpensive items to get them through the day). “Some of them don’t believe that they will own a house,” he added.

Staff members related other student struggles that they had been entrusted with, including extensive commitments to provide care for older and younger family members, past sexual abuse, and for one student, an assault she had witnessed. Sam Fitzpatrick continuously offered help in finding counseling services for this last student for symptoms of PTSD, but such treatment was stigmatized in her family. Khadra shared in an interview that, “Mr. Fitzpatrick has literally gone above and beyond for me.... I’ve never, I feel like almost in my entire life I’ve never had anybody like actually care that much about my well-being expect for like my parents.”

These empathetic understandings of students, their lives, and their needs were generated through compassionate perspective taking. The students themselves voiced their appreciation for the ways in which these educators empathized with them and the challenges they faced.

They seemed to get the attention of students and lead them to trust the teachers and staff members with whom they were working.

Discerning Teacher Respect for Students: Optimism, and Avoiding Unnecessary Judgement and Criticism

How Much do They Respect Me?

Another vitally important part of the student discernment process related to trust-building involved educator respect. Bill Driver had learned the importance of this early on – and it shaped how he thought about what a quality teacher was: “My definition of teaching is probably like what I told you before, is that they’re not going to remember what I taught them, they are going to remember how I treated them.” There were several ways that Harrison focal educators demonstrated this sort of respect for students: first by acting on strong shared beliefs in students’ capabilities; second by not judging students and by avoiding unnecessary criticism; third by explaining why they were doing specific things in class; and fourth by entrusting students with particular details of their out-of-school lives.

Optimistic Beliefs in Student Capabilities: Growth Mindset in Everyday Practice

As mentioned above, one of the cornerstones of Harrison's staff culture was strong shared beliefs in student capabilities. These beliefs were ubiquitous in the ways that Harrison educators and leaders talked about students, and they formed a readily apparent discourse throughout the school. On the 2014–2015 RCP Senior Survey, 95% of Harrison students either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "The teachers at this school believe that all students can do well" (97% of Asian/Pacific Islander students either strongly agreed or agreed; 92% of Black (not Hispanic) student either strongly agreed or agreed; 92% of Hispanic students either strongly agreed or agreed; and 93% of White students either strongly agreed or agreed) – ranking Harrison first among the seven RCP large comprehensive high schools (the six other schools' average on this item was 89%).

The Harrison focal educators themselves consistently referred to students, including students facing significant challenges, in positive terms. Sam Fitzpatrick often spoke of "seeing positives" in kids. In 2006, when he was advocating with the previous HHS principal for the College and Career Center to be expanded, he told him, "You have no idea how much we are underserving our kids." Andrea Lopez said she always told students, "It's not like you're not going to graduate, period. You are—it's just a matter of when."

These optimistic beliefs in students' capabilities were also powerfully evident in how staff members talked about students. Staff members consistently referred to students who were often tardy or "off-task," as being "squirrely" or "rambunctious." Such terms do not represent students in a completely negative light, and even carry positive emotional valences. They are evidence of the presence of a growth mindset among the staff (Dweck, 2007).

"Not Judging" Students

One of the most important ways that HHS focal staff members demonstrated their shared beliefs in student capabilities was by "not judging" students. Bill Driver said simply, "When I judge I'm always proven wrong." The reason not judging students was so important was that it showed that staff members believed in their capacity to grow, and gave students space to learn from their missteps and mistakes.

For example, Mary Padden related a challenging class period where a student named Yash refused twice to put his iPad away (he was listening to music) during a particular learning activity (the school district had a 1:1 digital initiative where every student was issued an iPad for the school year). She filled out a referral form for noncompliance and handed it to him. He threw it on the floor. Eventually he stopped listening to the music, though he didn't put the iPad away. The next day, Padden met him at the door of her classroom at the beginning of class, and greeted him, saying "Hey Yash, how are you?" He answered cordially. She explained later to Peter that in her mind, "It's always like every day is a new

day, I don't say, 'Hey—when yesterday,' I kind of let that go.... Every day is a new chance." She said that Yash had been "fine" ever since. Padden's approach to granting "new chances" everyday gives students the space to learn from their mistakes – a key dimension of resilience.

Avoiding Unnecessary Criticism: "They're Plenty Full of That"

Many of the Harrison focal educators also avoided criticizing students unnecessarily. They realized that such feedback could be perceived by students as disrespectful, naïve, and could impede their efforts to establish effective teaching–learning relationships with them. Sam Fitzpatrick explained:

Our students don't need more criticism, I think they're plenty full of that.... we're also trying to help students identify their strengths and, you know, move forward with their lives rather than focus on, you know, things they can't do. (Interview 6/8/15)

Data analysis from the broader "academic mindsets" study suggests that the reason avoiding unnecessary criticism is so important is because such negative feedback can reinforce students' low expectations for future success (see Demerath et al., in preparation).

Explaining Why

Harrison focal teachers also signaled respect for students by almost always explaining why they were doing particular things in class. They typically laid out the plan for the day at the start of the period, and explained where it fit into their overall learning objectives for the course. Sam Fitzpatrick said he had to be especially conscious of that in his comprehensive courses in the CCC: "I have to sell them why we're doing [it] – it has to make sense to them." He elaborated:

Second thing is, I think, and this is really important, I have this belief that in the first few minutes that a student is here [in the CCC], they will decide whether they can do this or not, whether they can succeed. And boy I better be ready for that first couple of minutes.... (Interview 6/8/15)

This approach to explaining why he was doing particular things in class inherently respected students' sense making abilities, as well as their time.

Trusting Students with Knowledge of Staff Members' Out of School Lives

Finally, another way that Harrison focal educators signaled respect for students was by intentionally sharing with them aspects of their lives outside of school. They realized that teaching and learning were deeply interpersonal activities, that students were inevitably curious about them, and that by getting to know them, students would be more likely to trust them and go along with what they did in class.

At a parent teacher conference night Peter spent some time with Driver, who filled him in on the latest details of learning about his family history and genealogy. He had just learned over the last year that he was one quarter Ho-Chunk, and this had led to all sorts of rich learning and re-thinking parts of his own identity (one of the teachers in the American Indian Education Program based at Harrison had recently become a mentor to him). One of his drum-line students was sitting nearby and seemed to be listening, and Driver looked at him, and said, “Hey, you remember when I was White?” The student said, “You said you’d never get a tattoo. But now you’ve got a dream catcher.” “Right,” Driver said, as rolled up his sleeve to show it to Peter. Finding ways to signal respect to students was perhaps the most important strategy the Harrison focal educators used for trust-building.

Perceived Unfair Treatment on the Basis of Race

However, though these strategies were evident throughout the school, some of the focal students brought up specific incidents where they felt that they had been treated unfairly by staff members – based on their racial identification. This was the most profound and wounding sort of disrespect students could experience, and these incidents seemed to have a strongly negative impact on their overall trust in the school. Richard Tucker recalled a series of miscommunications that led a White administrator to say that he had “disrespected” him. Shortly thereafter, when Richard had left his iPad in the cafeteria, the administrator found it and refused to return it to Richard until he apologized to him (a social worker intervened on Richard’s behalf).

Discerning Teacher Self-Awareness and “Credibility”: Overcoming Divides Based on Race and Class

How Real are They? Do They Know Who They are in Relation to Me?

Relatedly, several focal educators emphasized how a key part of their trust-building with students was being up front about who they were, and accounting for various aspects of their own positionality. While the focal educators sometimes mentioned race in their relationships with students, often they connected with them by finding common ground in their social class background.

Andrea Lopez said that she had wanted to be at Harrison in large part because of the diversity of the student body. She said that she had gone to a high school and college in Wisconsin that did not have great diversity, and that she knew she “wanted to work with a diverse population.” Roberta Fletcher had a Southeast Asian student in her fifth hour class in (spring, 2015) whose parents she had both taught about 16 years earlier. At the time, the mother had felt very ashamed when she got pregnant, and had a “toxic” relationship with her own mother. But she valued her relationship with Fletcher so much, and her ability to talk with her about the pregnancy that she later said that she had “saved her life.” She named her daughter Rebecca.

Sam Fitzpatrick talked about what he had to overcome in gaining students’ trust:

See, that there’s a huge schism between myself and their experience because I get tagged with that whole, you know, you’re Caucasian, you’re rich, you don’t know what it’s like... And there’s all kinds of strategies, when you’re trying to get them to build the winning streak, you know, to be credible to them to tell them that’s doable and that’s, part of that also been my story too: is to say, you know, ‘I was somebody who didn’t have money, I was somebody who didn’t have choices, I was somebody who has a fair amount of trauma in my life.’ (Interview 6/8/15)

Here Fitzpatrick talks about how he shares his own aspects of his own life experience in order to demonstrate his empathy with students and connect with them – especially growing up without a lot of money. He also points out how establishing this “credibility” is crucial for helping students develop what he refers to as “winning streaks” – which is taken up below.

Study data revealed that when the focal educators discussed their own self-awareness of race in their trust-building efforts with students it was usually in the context of their own motivation. Harrison began a professional learning initiative on racial equity in 2016—the year after data collection concluded for the study.

Discerning Teacher Professional Ability: Creating Classroom Belonging, Building Student Academic Engagement, and Practicing Equity Pedagogy

Do They Know How to Help Me Learn?

The Harrison focal educators also seemed well aware that students were discerning their professional ability: how well they knew their craft in order to help students succeed. This was another school-wide strength at Harrison: on the 2014–2015 RCP Senior Survey, 96% of Harrison students either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “My teachers stimulated my thinking and my interest in learning” (95% of Asian/Pacific Islander students either strongly agreed or agreed; 97% of Black (not Hispanic) student either strongly agreed or agreed; 95% of Hispanic students either strongly agreed or agreed; and 100% of White students either strongly agreed or agreed) – ranking Harrison first among the

seven RCP large comprehensive high schools (the six other schools' average on this item was 88%).

Study data indicated that Harrison focal staff members demonstrated their professional ability in three key areas: creating classroom belonging; building academic engagement; and practicing equity pedagogy. Their efforts in all three areas were oriented at helping students learn and ultimately gain their trust – something that Alecia Green emphasized in an interview. She said she had once told a teacher candidate,

I need to be educated and I finally realized that it's you know, it's also, it's my responsibility as well as the teachers responsibility to make sure I'm being educated.... And I said, just make sure your students are learning. Do not expect them to be learning just because you're spitting out a whole bunch of information at them. You need to make sure that they are learning.... (Interview 6/4/14)

Creating Classroom Community and Positive Affective Climate

The Harrison focal teachers had a wide array of strategies to construct engaging, comfortable, and, supportive learning environments in their classrooms – and to ensure that students were learning. At the beginning of each course she taught, Juliana Johnson asked her students about their ideal classroom. She asked,

What do you think it sounds like, feels like, and looks like? What are things that you hear people doing in your ideal classroom? What are they saying to each other? What am I saying to you? What does it feel like to you? And if someone walked by, what do you think it would look like – in the ideal classroom? (Interview 5/13/15)

She explained that she could then draw on the student responses to adjust things in the course. Such an approach respects students' learning preferences and encourages them to trust that the teacher will do what is best for them. Rebecca Fletcher

said that most kids she taught, “Become mine.” She said, “I think you’ll find that with a lot of teachers in this building – you belong to us. Like – you were ours.”

Engaging Students with Learning

The Harrison focal teachers had a wide variety of techniques they drew upon to engage students with learning. Some required considerable effort – all were intended to capture students’ attention and build interest in what they were hoping for them to learn.

Drawing on Personality, Charisma, and “Likability” to “Hook Students”

Several teachers talked about the importance of students “liking” them and how they self-consciously used aspects of themselves to “hook” students into what they were doing in class.

Jessie Richardson, who often drew on her background in theatre to enliven her classes, said that teaching satisfied a creative part of her. She explained, “It’s just a wonderful, wonderful opportunity to be goofy, let the kids see a side of you that you never see.” Rebecca Fletcher said, “. . . I know that my students like me and because they like me they’re generally willing to work for me.” However, she confided that she worries “. . . about when maybe when my charisma is not quite as powerful as I know it is now.”

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Connecting Learning to Students’ Lives

At the time of the study, Harrison had not yet initiated a school-wide push for culturally responsive pedagogy – this was to come in 2015–2016 as part of the school’s continuing effort to meet district racial equity goals. But there were pockets of culturally responsive practices in the building here and there – two important such places were Mr. Driver’s classroom and Mr. Hill’s office. In an interview, Mr. Hill talked about what he brought to African American students as an African American male:

I bring in information to African American students and others within the building that, you know, show the great contributions of what African Americans have done. I retrace the history about who we are and who we’ve ever been as a group of people. . . . I sometimes take on the tough topics, you know,

because I know there are others who would like to but wouldn't, you know.
(Interview 5/22/15)

Using Play and Humor

Play, playful teaching, and humor were commonly used to engage students in most, but not all of the focal teachers' classrooms. In a hallway after class, Cliff Anderson once explained to me that he thought kids liked his classes in part because he tried to make math fun, "just by telling stupid jokes.... largely at my own expense." When Bill Driver checked in with students he knew in the hallway, he often said, "Everything groovy here?" At the end of his classes, he frequently told students, "Have a below average rest of the day." Using play and humor was serious business for many of the focal staff members. It could even be competitive – in a good-natured way. Fletcher was annoyed when students told her about other teachers they thought were funnier than she was. She told us she didn't think those teachers were funny at all – "Like as an adult, they're not funny."

In this spirit, for many teachers at Harrison, like Rebecca Fletcher and Cliff Anderson, being funny was serious business: it was part of their strategy of engaging students (see Brake, 2020, p. 291; and Rincon-Gallardo, 2019). Khadra offered this advice for future teachers: "Maybe like once in a while like do something fun for like one class period. Maybe like once every three months or something, like it really helps, it really does help in our overall learning, I think."

Equity Pedagogy

The Harrison focal teachers also sought to gain students' trust in the ways in which they developed and practiced their own equity pedagogy, which in their terms, meant, "meeting students where they are." Their practice of equity pedagogy had several dimensions, including being skilled at perhaps the biggest challenge facing teachers today – differentiating instruction in the classroom.

Creating Peer Learning and Leadership Opportunities for Students

Roberta Hawk's key strategies for differentiating instruction and learning in her classroom included relying on peer learning strategies and positioning students as leaders in her classroom. Hawk explained to her classes at the beginning of each marking period, that if they were doing well: "That's awesome that you have an A, but if the kid next to you is failing what are you doing to help that person?" Other teachers created other leadership opportunities for students to help with a sense of belonging in their classrooms. Jessie Richardson had students in her classes volunteer to be "ambassadors" to support colleagues' substitute teachers.

Allowing for Student Vibrancy in the Inclusive Classroom

Most of the focal teachers' classrooms were calm and quiet, when needed, and loud and animated at other times. Allowing for students to be vibrant in their classrooms was especially important as the school sought to implement the district's new "push-in" inclusion policy. Steve Swensson was especially adept at this – On a day when Peter was visiting his class during a probability review game, one particular student grabbed some dice off Swensson's desk at the beginning of the class, and then, as the game progressed, stood or strolled at the back of the classroom, regularly bouncing the dice off the walls, sometimes dropping them on the floor. All the while, however, he was participating in the game, which he eventually won. Swensson described the student as:

Just a squirrely kid and lots of energy and I think there might be other teachers that sort of restrict him and sort of shut him down, I don't mind the enthusiasm as long as he's not, you know, bothering other students.

While in other classes, this student may have been reprimanded for being noisy and out of his seat, Swensson understood that movement, as long as it did not disrupt other students, helped him engage and focus. He noted that in the last quarter, the student had gotten all of his assignments in. This was a teacher that had an impressively high threshold for student vibrancy in the classroom.

Providing a "Safe Space" for Students

Finally, Robert Hill and Bill Driver, both focal educators from minoritized groups, explicitly referred to their offices or classrooms as "safe spaces" or "safe havens" for students from minoritized groups. Robert Hill was explicit about this. He explained:

A lot of it is, they need a safe space... so they can hear some positive things... Cuz they got some negative things outside... But here I try to make it so they can hear some positive things, a safe space... The thing is, to be welcoming, to be understanding...

Discerning Teacher Commitment: Patience, Proximity, and Willingness to Invest Emotional Labor

How close are they willing to get to me? What are they willing to do to help me?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Harrison educators seemed to know that students were discerning how committed they were to helping them. This vital part of earning students' trust was evident in how available teachers were, and most critically, how much they cared, and were willing to invest emotional labor in students. Another big part of this was patience. Khadra explained, "Definitely, patience. The teacher who's willing to be patient and not completely just like give up on me right away and has been very helpful."

Availability and Closeness (Emotional Proxemics)

The focal Harrison educators consistently made themselves available to students, both in terms of physical closeness when giving one-on-one advice or help (taking care to respect personal boundaries), and in terms of how they communicated and shared their time. Rebecca Fletcher frequently exhorted students to move closer to the front of the room. At one point during one of our classroom visits, she noticed a student who was sitting alone in a back row of the classroom.

RF: Can you see back there?

Student: Not really.

RF: So come closer [the student packs up their things and moves to the next row up].

RF: Fantastic. I like it when you come closer... I'm like the big bad wolf dressed up like grandma [smiling as she turns to the white board]... At one side of your paper, you should write, an annotation, and on the other the how to write an annotation... (Fieldnotes 4/29/15)

As the girls golf coach, Steve Swensson generally returned student text messages even when out on the course. Juliana Johnson talked about how students frequently opened up to her about family pressures – for example when the class discussed independent living, one student opened up to her about how his family was in credit card debt. She said, “It’s all about those real life experiences.” She and her co-teacher kept their door always open, so “you can sit and eat lunch with us and you know that you can come seventh hour and I’ll help you.”

In anthropology, proxemics refers to the cultural study of space (Hall, 1990). The key pattern at Harrison was that virtually all of the focal teachers found ways to narrow social distance between themselves and students – either physically, in classrooms, in terms of communication, in and out of school, and also in terms of what they talked about (see below).

Enacting Commitment: Investing Emotional Labor in Students

Some Harrison educators referred to their relationships with students, often intense, usually enduring, as “real.” This seemed to mean that they involved caring for the whole person – not just the student part. Andrea Lopez’ approach was to try to be always available to students to listen. She told students that if they were having a bad day and they couldn’t focus in class, her door was always open. She said when students took her up on that, “sometimes they start talking and sometimes they don’t.” Sometimes students just came in and sat in her office. When that happened, she just told the student that she would go about her work. She said she’d ask them at some point if they wanted to talk; sometimes students would just say, “No, I’m good right now.” Then, within a couple of minutes they would say, “Okay, I’m ready to go to class.”

One focal student who benefited tremendously from the trusting relationships she built at Harrison was Claire Dunlap. When Claire arrived at Harrison she thought she wanted to go to college (she would be the first from her family), but knew little about how to navigate the process. When we asked her how she dealt with challenges she encountered in high school, she talked about the support she had received from Sam Fitzpatrick: “Because yeah, he let me talk to him about everything and that was great and so now I’m just like if I have a problem, I’ll just speak out about it.” She left Harrison with a full scholarship to Amherst College. For his part, Sam Fitzpatrick said one of the keys was to demonstrate to students his commitment to them: “If students believe you can truly help them, and you are committed to their success, trust comes quickly.” As Alecia Green began to experience stronger relationships with her teachers at Harrison, she reflected,

I learned that umm the teachers here they’re just like they can be your best friend and your teacher at the same time... You can talk to them about anything that you need to talk to them about. And expect to get genuine answers....

Educators and educational researchers have increasingly been calling for more caring and “family-like” relationships in school (Epstein, 2018; Louis & Murphy, 2017; Aspen Institute, 2019). As part of their efforts to gain students’ trust, these Harrison focal teachers expressed concern for challenges students were facing outside of school, and offered them reassurance, guidance, and support – all of which involved considerable emotional labor.

Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

This study used the tools of anthropology, ethnography, and interpretive science to develop a grounded model of how educators earn students’ trust in a high-performing U.S. urban high school. The study sampled the perspectives of students, teachers, and staff members, and involved observation of educators in their classrooms or offices to see what they actually did as they interacted with students in the course of their everyday practices in school. Analysis of this practice-based evidence suggested that at the core of these relationships is a process of *mutual discernment* whereby adults and young people read one another and explore the possibilities of entering into learning partnerships. For the educators, study data led us to infer that their trust building strategies were largely based on imagining the student discernment process and responding to a set of unspoken queries about them that, over time, they seem to have learned were often on the minds of students. This analytic process revealed six local constituents of trust: teacher motivation, empathy, respect, self-awareness, professional ability, and commitment. Data from the study suggest that students and teachers found all six of these constituent building blocks of trust to be meaningful as they developed learning partnerships across various dimensions of sociocultural difference. The voices and experiences of the majority of focal students indicated that the mental models of trust that they developed bonded them to

specific staff members, classrooms and places in the school, and motivated them to engage in their classes. It is important to note here that students nominated a variety of different teachers and staff members in the school that were able to contribute to their sense of belonging.

These findings extend existing understandings regarding student-educator trust building in several ways. The model's focus on this dialectical processes of trust discernment extends previous research on the importance of student sense-making, interpretation and appraisals of adult relationship-building efforts in school (see Bishop, 2013; Brake, 2020; Phillippo, 2012; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014; Yeager et al., 2017). In relation to Phillippo's work, it shows how teachers communicate early messages regarding their own trustworthiness to students, and how they ensure that these messages are empathetic and respectful. It also elaborates how educators actually communicate care and commitment to students in some cases across racial and sociocultural difference (see Brooms et al., 2021); A promising future direction will be how educators further incorporate their own racial awareness in their trust-building efforts – especially in the wake of the national reckoning over racial justice since the murder of George Floyd.

In addition, while previous research on student “mental models of trust” has been based on the single criterion of respect (see Yeager et al., 2017), data analysis from this study identified five other constituent elements of trust in addition to respect that both matter to students, and that teachers have found to be effective in relationship building across various dimensions of sociocultural difference. Naturalistic research on student mental models of trust in other settings will likely identify other context-dependent constituents of the construct. Ultimately, these constituents can be synthesized, operationalized and used in intervention and experimental research to advance interdisciplinary theories of trust-building and knowledge of the relational contexts that shape student engagement in schools (see Pianta et al., 2012, p. 381). For example, these findings can be used to identify variables to measure in student–teacher relationship student self-report survey instruments (Phillippo et al., 2017).

The practice-based evidence that is the basis for the model explicates valuable truths regarding trust-building that the focal educators had discovered over their 147 combined years of professional practice: to demonstrate empathy and respect; to be aware of how race and socioeconomic class have shaped their lives; to be able to ensure that students feel like they belong in their classrooms, that they receive equitable resources and attention to be engaged with learning; and finally to show students that they are available, and are willing to get close and invest emotional labor in them. Importantly, the focal teachers' relational expertise evolved much more from what they had learned on the job, alongside colleagues and with students, through their own practices and evolving professional expertise, than from what they had learned in their teacher education programs or through professional development efforts. Their knowledge and practice was consistent with much of what we know from research in child development and the anthropology of childhood about how young people learn best: in communal environments; with emotional and relational support; through relevant, real-world situations; through play; and often with ample humor (see Blum, 2016; Lancy,

2008; Robinson & Aronica, 2016; Rincon-Gallardo, 2019). In this way, this practice-based evidence points the way towards new and important competencies that can counter disturbing trends towards the deprofessionalization and clericalization of teaching and further develop the profession of teaching at a time when retention and recruitment are of national concern.

Finally, though several of the focal teachers had substantial charisma, “cool factors,” and senses of humor, virtually all of the strategies and techniques they used can be learned and adapted by other teachers and teacher candidates. Moreover, teachers and teacher candidates in other kinds of settings will certainly develop other culturally responsive means of developing trust. The key overarching challenge for teachers and teacher candidates is to ask themselves, both individually and in collaborative professional learning efforts, what they can do to build trust with their students, and to explore how they might respond to the student queries included in this paper – or others like them. It is likely that more focused skill building for trusting relationships in districts, schools, and teacher preparation programs, could have substantial impacts on student belonging, engagement and achievement.

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