Collegial Trust and the Organizational School Context: The Role of Homogeneity of Staff Culture

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Organizational studies frequently assess effects of the workplace context on employee outcomes which relate to employee and organizational performance. An important factor regarding the latter issues is the nature of interpersonal trust relationships between organizational members. Also within the educational literature, a strong trust culture in school is increasingly recognized as a factor that influences schools' effectiveness. Trust among teachers enhances teachers' professionalism and learning, partly because collegial trust fosters teacher collaboration as it indicates the level of bonding social capital in school. As such, students benefit as well when teachers' practices are supported through strong collegial trust relations. Educational research that examines the impact of the teacher's work context on his or her level of trust in colleagues is scarce however. Yet, schools are a particular kind of client-serving organizations in which teachers are confronted with a particular public of students. Teachers have certain notions about teaching, but when they end up in schools with a specific group of students, this may affect their own beliefs and practices, and even the nature of staff culture. For example, faculty trust is shown to be more fragile in schools where the students are marked by a working class background than in elite schools. Moreover, the socioeconomic composition of the student body relates to conceptions among teachers about students' ability to meet the expectations imposed on them. When discrepancies exists among teachers' perceptions about the students' teachability, this may diminish the level of collegial trust. After all, shared mental cognitions or shared beliefs/attitudes may facilitate trust among teachers given that individuals who interpret their environment analogously tend to behave in similar ways and therefore more easily meet each other's expectations. The degree to which teachers from a school share their beliefs about students' teachability can be considered as an aspect of schools' organizational culture, namely the homogeneity of staff culture. As most organizational and educational studies have put their focus on the content of organizational culture, we choose to pay attention to the role of homogeneity of organizational culture. Because the composition of the student body associates with staff culture and with the level of faculty trust in colleagues, and because the degree of sharedness of teacher beliefs could facilitate interpersonal trust, we suggest that the homogeneity of staff culture could mediate the impact of socioeconomic school composition on a teacher's trust in his or her colleagues. Furthermore, we investigate if a mismatch in ethnic composition between the student body and the staff indicates the presence of depersonalized in-group trust among teachers. The impact of school sector, size, and teacher characteristics is taken into account as well. Examining how the organizational school context, in particular the homogeneity of staff culture, influences a teacher's trust in his or her colleagues extents our knowledge of a factor that strongly determines the successfulness of professional development programs in secondary education. This study then is of particular importance with respect to the practice and policy of school leadership and management.

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used
Data were collected by means of anonymous written questionnaires within the context of the Flemish Educational Assessment during the 2004-2005 school year. Across a representative sample of 84 secondary schools in Flanders, 2.104 teachers instructing the third and/or fifth grade, and 11.872 third- and fifth-grade students from the same sample of schools plus one additional school, completed questionnaires. Our measure for trust in colleagues is derived from the trust-scale developed by Hoy and Tschannen-Moran. Cronbach's alpha for our trust scale is 0.89. The homogeneity of staff culture is assessed as the within-school standard

deviation of teachers' beliefs about students' teachability, after controlling for this aggregated measure to possess sufficient between school variability. Our hypotheses are tested by following the procedures in the meso-mediation model as proposed by Mathieu and Taylor (2007). The associations between organizational school context, teacher characteristics and trust in colleagues are based on stepwise multilevel analyses.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

A mismatch between the staff and the student body in terms of ethnic composition associates with stronger trust in colleagues. This finding is interpreted as indicating a process of depersonalized in-group trust formation. Trust in colleagues is fragile when the student body is marked by a working class background. In these schools, teachers diverge to a higher degree in terms of their beliefs about students' teachability, indicating the presence of a less homogenous staff culture than in elitist schools. Homogeneity of staff culture in turn predicts higher levels of trust in colleagues. The final model shows that the lower levels of trust in low socioeconomic schools are explained by the presence of a less homogeneous staff culture. Results also indicate that trust in colleagues is stronger in private schools than in public schools. As trust is the backbone of strong and sustainable professional communities, our findings matter to the nature of school based policies and management. We show that a teacher's trust in his or her colleagues is fostered when teachers interpret their work environment analogously, and that school leaders in low socioeconomic schools should pay attention to teachers' shared interpretations of students' teachability to facilitate collegial trust to develop.

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