Beyond Cultural Competence:

Examining Mechanisms of Trust-Building Between Early Childhood Teachers and Students

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Abstract

In response to increasing evidence that trusting relationships with teachers enhances young children's learning, this study sought to understand how that trust is built, especially across differences in identity. The participants were head teachers at a laboratory school affiliated with a prominent research university. The qualitative inquiry included three semi-structured individual interviews and six classroom observations, which were analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The study found that trust building is an interactional, multi-directional process. The form this process takes is contingent on the context of both the child and the teacher, but there are several common mechanisms that educators identified as effective.

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Introduction

Especially for young children, learning does not occur in a vacuum. Children's learning is influenced by many things, such as the number of words they hear before age 3 and the amount of cortisol they are exposed to in utero (Glover, 2011; Hart & Risley, 1995). It should therefore be no great stretch to imagine that children's learning would be seriously influenced by the relationships they have with their educators, and indeed research does support this idea (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Roorda et al., 2011). Since we know that early learning lays the foundation for long-term achievement, teacher-child relationships are crucial to build in early education classrooms.

The literature on early education often overlooks that essential connection between child and educator, especially if the child is differently able or has a cultural or racial difference from the teacher. Additionally, much of the research on trust does not focus on the ways that the mechanisms of trust-building intersect with external circumstances, such as the life experience of the child, the culture of the institution, or the structure of the classroom. An in-depth look at how trust is built, manifested, and shaped in concert with environmental factors offers important information to educators, institutions, and families about how to maximize potential for trust in the classroom and, accordingly, maximize learning potential.

This perspective is especially useful for new or aspiring teachers, who may not yet have an approach to developing trust with children or who may be struggling to earn the trust of a particular child. While there are many psychological and pedagogical components to teacher-training programs, these skills are often considered impossible to master in the abstract; rather, new teachers must learn directly either from their own classroom experiences or from those of other teachers (Skinner, 2005).

Finally, there is a shortage of studies that allow teachers to tell their own complex stories about earning the trust of children (Holland, 2015). Rather than focusing on the perceptions of an external observer, this work aims to center the voices of practicing educators as the experts in order to provide a comprehensive look at the way teacher-student trust is built and maintained within a specific educational institution.

Literature Review

In her 2013 Ted Talk "Every Kid Needs A Champion," educator and speaker Rita Pierson described the significance of relationships in creating productive classrooms. "Kids don't learn from people they don't like," she said, in response to a colleague who saw education as primarily being about the transfer of information. Research indicates that Pierson was correct – strong classroom relationships are correlated with increased engagement and, ultimately, achievement (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Roorda et al., 2011). One important aspect of a strong in-school relationship, especially across lines of difference, is trust (Holland, 2015). Trust improves students' classroom behavior and their high school outcomes (Romero, 2015). Both from our experiences as learners and from research, we also know that strong teacher-student relationships are essential for building students' self-esteem and their love of learning (Agirdag, Van Houett, & Avermaet, 2012). According to Dombro, Jablon, and Stetson (2011), trust between young children and early educators is "the foundation of learning… [trust] allows children to explore and take risks as they learn about the world" (p. 64). Dombro et al. go on to explain that strong relationships are especially important in early learning because the child needs a close relationship with an educator in order to be open to learning, and relies on the educator to structure that learning. Because fostering identity development, love of learning, and academic achievement are core values of education, it is clear that teacher-student trust is at the heart of

successful classrooms.

According to Sanders and Guerra (2016), the trust-building process may be complicated by a lack of "cultural congruency," a term that refers to a situation in which a child's home cultural community, "a population that engages in daily activities reflective of a set of common goals and beliefs", matches the cultural community of the school (p. 46). "How trust and safety are enacted is cultural," Sanders and Guerra further write, an idea that is reinforced by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (p. 47). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory states that development cannot be separated from its cultural context. The sign systems (spoken language, body language, and other aspects of communication) that children learn are culturally rooted, Vygotsky argues, and are heavily mediated by the adults in children's lives. McNeary (2016) explains that since Vygotsky believed that the self is built through childhood interactions, it follows that a child's cultural environment – and especially the adults communicating that culture – would play serious roles in children's identities, socialization, and ability to learn. Therefore children whose home cultural community differs from that of the teacher's are likely to experience a mismatch of context that could alienate them from the classroom, confuse their ability to read trustworthiness in adults, and contribute to loss of a child's home language and culture (Sanders & Guerra, 2016).

Weisner's (2002) ecocultural theory extends Vygotsky's sociocultural theory by arguing, "the cultural pathways in which human development occurs constitute the most important influences shaping development and developmental outcomes" (p. 276). Weisner (2002) argues further argues that those cultural pathways are made up of activities and routines like bedtime, recreation, and mealtimes. Weisner's research indicates that the more stability there is across these activities in school and at home, the better the outcomes for the child's well-being.

Further underscoring the importance of culture in the classroom is the concept of "habitus." Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979) coined the term "habitus," which refers to the ability to "just know" what to do in any given situation due to exposure and familiarity. When children from differing cultural, socioeconomic, and ability backgrounds come together in a single environment, they will bring different forms of cultural capital (e.g., skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, or material belongings) that will carry different levels of value in the classroom. For example, it may be customary for one child to make eye contact with adults at home and not customary for another child to do the same. The "habitus" of the classroom, rather than some objective truth about the way one "should" behave, will determine the extent to which each child feels comfortable and like they belong. When one is within the culture of power, habitus is almost entirely invisible, but it can be one of the fiercest barriers for those outside the culture of power. A lack of the "right" or legitimated habitus – a common outcome from a lack of cultural congruency – might well interfere with a child's development of trust (Anderson, 2012).

Taken together, these three theorists create a strong argument for the idea that a child's home culture plays a significant role in his or her educational experience. Especially in early education, before a child has had the chance to learn alternative sign systems, Vygotsky's theory indicates that a child's communication and self-development will be grounded in their home culture and, for many children in the U.S. today, not necessarily match those of the teacher. The formation of student-teacher trust, therefore, is essential for a teacher to learn how best to communicate with the child, intentionally provide space for the child's cultural expressions, and ensure that the classroom culture does not invalidate the child's home environment. Weisner's emphasis on consistent cultural pathways between home and school is an important component

of addressing these challenges, suggesting that teachers should strive to provide cultural congruency when they can.

However, it is not possible for all children to experience cultural congruency with their teachers in the United States. Children of color make up more than half of the US student population, but the teaching force remains over 80% White (US Department of Education, 2016). No matter how children and teachers are divided up, those numbers alone clearly illustrate that it is impossible for all U.S. children to have culturally congruent classrooms. In his book *Just Schools: Pursuing Equality in Societies of Difference*, Shweder (2008) summarizes this challenge by presenting "the idea of an equality-difference paradox [which] refers to the tension or tradeoff between public policies supporting genuine cultural diversity in beliefs, values, and family life practices, versus public policies promoting equal educational outcomes for all children regardless of cultural or family background" (p. 5-6). In other words, Shweder's equality-difference paradox condenses the challenge that even the best-intentioned educators face: we claim to value equal opportunity and education for all, but our students have such disparate needs that it can feel impossible to fulfill all of them in a single classroom. Building trust in multicultural environments is a central example of Shweder's paradox. If educators wished to provide a classroom in which every student experienced perfect cultural congruency, Shweder's paradox suggests that it would be necessary to segregate children by home culture so that the routines of the classroom would match their routines at home. This choice obviously does not reflect integration movements or the values of "diversity and inclusion," but the alternative – culturally diverse classrooms – makes it difficult to meet the needs of every child. In these classrooms, the risk is that "inclusion" will actually be whitewashing or color-blindness. In order to have truly inclusive classrooms, educators and administrators must work carefully to

develop a framework for humility and cultural responsiveness, including the prioritization of building cross-cultural trust.

If the best-intentioned educators have trouble building cross-cultural trust, the reality of student-teacher relationships across the United States is likely bleak. Historically and contemporarily, education has been weaponized to rob children of their home cultures and force assimilation into Western culture. Pressing people of color into what Anderson (2015) refers to as "The White Space" can expose them to violence, alienate them from their peers, and demand that they prove that "ghetto stereotypes" do not apply to them (pp. 10-21). Perhaps the most prominent example of education as a tool of deculturization is the Native American boarding schools, whose singular purpose was to force assimilation and commit ethnocide. The Rainy Mountain School, for example, kidnapped children from reservations, gave students English names, cut off their hair, required uniforms, segregated them by sex, marched them from class to class, mandated chapel attendance, and suppressed the native tongue (Ellis, 1996). Watras (2004) calls this "education for extinction." To this day, English-only policies in places such as Arizona continue to deculturize and diminish opportunities for bilingual children and indigenous children (State of Arizona, 2000). Indigenous children, African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans continue to face such marked racism from their teachers that they often intentionally withdraw from classrooms in order to maintain personal integrity and loyalty to family and culture (Kohl, 1995; Shakespear, 1999). Anderson (2012) notes that the "legacy of the racial caste system" forces many Black families to warn their children of the inherent risks of engaging in White society, which deepens the sense of alienation that those children feel during their formative educational years (pp. 593-597). Furthermore, because of the deeply ingrained racism in education as an institution and in US society at large, it is nearly impossible for White teachers

not to harbor implicit bias and very likely that many will enact problematic classroom routines. As Shakespear puts it, "Any White teacher who reads this and says, 'Well, I'm not a racist," should utter as her next sentence, 'Well, I'm not a realist'" (1999, p. 79). As a result of our violent past and difficult present, the racial differences present in many classrooms may well pose a barrier to building trust.

While much of the research on racial tension between students and teachers is focused on adolescence, the patterns of racial discrimination are active in early classrooms as well. Downer, Goble, Myers, and Pianta (2016) demonstrated that Black children's skills and behavior are rated differently by White teachers and Black teachers. On average, Black teachers reported fewer increases in Black children's challenging behavior over the course of a year than White teachers did, and they rated Black children's literacy higher than White teachers did. Gilliam (2016) further highlights the impacts of implicit bias in early education by demonstrating that White educators expected little from Black children and that they watched Black boys most closely when scanning for challenging behaviors. Gilliam also demonstrates that knowledge of Black children's backgrounds mitigates these results, suggesting that positive teacher-student relationships in early education might help transcend implicit bias.

Therefore, despite its challenges, the consequences of failing to build trust are steep. Since we established earlier that trust is a core component to student-teacher relationships and that those relationships are critical to students' broadly-defined "school successes," the lack of a trusting relationship must be a contributor to the existing "achievement gaps" that we see in the US, as well as to the disparate dropout rates and educational experiences. We further know that in situations of cultural congruency, classroom discipline rates drop, suggesting that implicit bias – something mitigated by the development of trusting relationships – is a profound contributor to

the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba, Mediratta, & Rausch, 2016). It is therefore essential to the development of educational equity that we develop understandings of how teachers build trust with their students, especially students whose cultural sign systems differ from their own.

The present study will pursue the following research questions:

Research Questions

1) Through what mechanisms do teachers at this school build trust with their students?

2) How are these mechanisms altered to account for a lack of cultural congruency, if at all?

3) To what degree do teachers feel these adjustments are effective at establishing a trusting relationship with children?

Methodology

Design

Post-positivism as a research paradigm asserts that there is a single reality, but that individuals or stakeholders might have different perspectives on that reality. As such, post-positivists believe that reality can only be approximated by researchers, who, according to Phillips (1990), acknowledge that they can never truly be impartial. Phillips clarifies that post-positivists do not throw the baby out with the bathwater – just because reality cannot be precisely known does not mean that there is no "warranted assertability"(p. 32). In other words, post-positivists believe that reasonable conclusions can be drawn from logical, well-built bodies of evidence from a multiplicity of scientific sources. Guba (1990) describes the methodology of post-positivism as "modified experimental," meaning that post-positivist inquirers work in less controlled settings than positivists and leverage more qualitative data as reinforcement for their quantitative data (p. 23).

Interviews are a good fit for the post-positivist paradigm because they allow researchers to gather multiple perspectives on a single issue. Triangulating interview data with observations further bolsters the post-positivist approach, as it allows researchers to add another perspective (their own) on the same issues. Since post-positivists aim to approximate reality as accurately as they can, it follows that they would deeply examine several different perspectives and compare them with their own observations in order to approach an authentic description of a phenomenon. For those reasons, I chose to investigate my research questions through the post-positivist lens, selecting interviews and observations as appropriate epistemological tools.

Participants

These questions were investigated through a series of interviews and observations with the teachers at lab school in Massachusetts that is affiliated with a prominent research university. It serves 66 children ages 2 years, 9 months through 7 years of age from preschool through second grade. About 35% of the students speak a language other than English at home. There are four head teachers at the school, two male and two female. Three of these teachers consented to be interviewed. The first of them, known by the pseudonym "June" in this text, is a middle-aged Filipino cisgender woman who has been teaching kindergarten at this school for a number of years. She is married and has two adolescent children. "David," a White cisgender male, came to the teaching profession a little later in his life and has been teaching early elementary school, currently first and second grade, for less than ten years. He is married with a young daughter. And "Vincent," an African-American cisgender male, has been teaching in early education classrooms for the majority of his career and is the head teacher in one of two preschool classrooms at the school. He is married with a young daughter.

Procedures

The research proposal was approved in December of 2017 by my thesis committee: Dr. Christy McWayne, Dr. George Scarlett, and Dr. Steven Cohen. I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval on November 21, 2017 and began working with school leaders to schedule interviews immediately thereafter. The interview questions arose from a feedback loop with Professor Mary Casey, who taught a Qualitative Research Methods class at Tufts in 2017. In class, we discussed how to write questions that were simple, answerable, and not dependent on the researcher's assumptions.

The participants were privately interviewed outside of school hours (see sample questions in appendix) in a location that they found convenient. The interviews were semi-structured interviews to allow for a back-and-forth dialogue that could flex to meet the experiences of the teachers. The interviews ranged from 21 minutes and 50 seconds to 44 minutes and 58 seconds, with a mean length of 36 minutes and 30 seconds. Teachers were not compensated. Each agreed to be audio-recorded with the provision that the recordings would be deleted after transcription.

I also conducted two classroom observations of the interviewee in order to increase understanding of the student population, the teacher-student dynamics in the classroom, the classroom climate, and any trust-building practices built into the everyday routine. While it would have been ideal to do one observation preceding the interview and one observation following, scheduling did not always allow for that, so I adjusted to make sure that one observation fulfilled the role of the first observation by allowing me to ground myself in the realities of the classroom without drawing any conclusions. My field notes for these observations were limited to description, not analysis. The second observation allowed me to see what deeper dynamics could be observed with the information presented in the interview. The purpose of the second observation was to deepen the understanding of how the trust-building strategies

discussed in the interview were being utilized during classroom activities and how the environmental circumstances identified by the interviewee intersected with trust-building practices. The observations ranged in length from 30 minutes to 50 minutes, with a mean length of 35 minutes. Field notes were taken during both observations and analyzed alongside the interviews.

Following the interview, participants were asked if they would like to receive partial transcripts of their interviews that have already been coded and analyzed. This would give them the opportunity to revise their comments or offer a different interpretation from mine. This process, known in the literature as member-checking, is often fraught with complications; participants become embarrassed about grammar, second-guess their testimonies, or misunderstand the purpose of the process (Carlson, 2010). For that reason, I offered them the choice as to whether or not they wish to participate in this secondary process, gave them partial transcripts that only encompass what will be included in the results, and explained the purpose behind member checking. However, no participant chose to review these transcripts.

Data Analytic Plan

The interviews were analyzed using a technique known as Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is an analysis method meant for small sample sizes because it "focuses upon contextualized and detailed accounts of experience" (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p. 20). According to Reid et al., this method has been used for research on a variety of topics. It is well suited to small-scale studies that examine participant experiences from the "bottom up," minimizing researcher assumptions and placing the participants at the center as the experts. A strong IPA analysis is interpretive (not considered "factual"), grounded in data, and believable to participants and other stakeholders (Reid et al., 2005). In order to allow for in-depth data

collection, Smith and Osborn (2007) recommend creating a space without interruptions and conducting semi-structured interviews.

The analysis process of IPA has several components. In the first stage, the researcher reads through the interview transcripts several times and makes comments in the margins. "There are no rules about what is commented upon," write Smith and Osborn (2007, p. 27). "Some of the comments are attempts at summarizing or paraphrasing, some will be associations or connections that come to mind, and others may be preliminary interpretations" (p. 67). In the second stage, these notes are re-analyzed and condensed into a series of relevant themes. At this time, no part of the data is more or less significant than another part, and no theme is too small to make note of. Finally, the researcher will make an initial list of themes and begin to cluster those together into larger themes, listing them in order of significance. What qualifies as significant is largely up to the researcher: it could be frequency, or intensity, or something that seemed particularly important to the subject. Throughout this coding process, the researcher must be constantly checking back to make sure the participants' words match what is emerging. If participants had opted into member checking, it would have taken place at this juncture.

The process is repeated with each interview. By the final analysis, the lists are cross-examined for "superordinate themes," ideas that emerge frequently across interviews or that carry depth of meaning. A master list of themes emerged, each carrying citations of participant language, which is then translated into conclusions (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The IPA analysis process was first completed by hand with printed interview transcripts. I read each interview twice before taking detailed notes in the margins, which I then narrowed down into "themes" for each interview. The superordinate list of themes was compiled after coding each interview individually. By the final stage, the transcripts were uploaded to NVivo, a

qualitative research software, which allowed me to easily reference quotes and visually display coded interviews. Within Nvivo, I coded the interviews according to the final superordinate list of themes.

After speaking with my advisor, Christy McWayne, I drew up a preliminary concept map that included all of my findings. Together we narrowed the logical flow to emphasize the idea of personal context, both of the educator and the child, intersecting with the trust-building process in a meaningful way.

Results

In order to answer my three research questions, I first needed to establish that participants considered trust a necessary prerequisite to learning. This was the foundation of the study because it made the rest of the information significant. After confirming that teachers did believe trust was a cornerstone of learning, I then organized their testimonies into common themes that shed light on the ways that they built trust with children. These were separated out into larger themes, such as Developmentally Appropriate Practice, and then into a maximum of three subthemes that I thought required more specific explanation or examples. After going through each mechanism in detail and relating it to the core question of culture if possible, I discussed some external factors that intersected with this particular study of trust-building in order to show how the identified mechanisms interacted with the outside environment. Finally, I wanted to emphasize how teachers believed trust manifested in children in order to show that they had successfully used these techniques to earn their students' trust. The chart below illustrates the final superordinate list of themes, grouped by heading.

Trust as a Foundation for Meaningful Learning	Mechanisms of Trust-Building
	• Developmentally appropriate practice
	 ○ Consistency and transparency
	 ○ Scaffolding
	 ○ Playfulness
	• Respecting children as individuals
	 ○ Exchange of worlds
	 ○ Building from prior experiences
	• Empowerment of children
	• Assume good intentions
	• Classroom Community
	• Institutional Factors Affecting Trust
	 ○ Anti-Bias Education
	  ▪ Curriculum
	  ▪ Home-school connection
		Manifestations of Trust
		• Authenticity of child
		• Fallibility of adult

Fig. 1: Comprehensive List of Themes

Trust as a Foundation for Meaningful Learning

All participants in the study agreed that mutual trust is fundamental to their work as educators. One teacher stated that academic learning is rare, and sometimes impossible, in the absence of trust. "On the first day… we're definitely not learning anything academic, that's not even a question. They're not going to listen to any of that till we've got the relationship going, so there's no point," he said. "I mean, could you just be disconnected, yeah, I mean there's always some kids who are so desperate to learn something, I mean they've been waiting for that. *(switches to voice of child)* "Ah, I knew we were going to do multiplication this year, I've been wanting to do multiplication, I'm so excited!" (*returns to his voice)* Yeah, I mean, one or two [children might], maybe. But… by and large, I don't see anything really happening until that trust is built."

Another teacher agreed that, while it is technically possible for children to learn from someone they don't trust, "even if they are learning the academic aspect of it, if the environment is [fearful], or they can't trust [it], you will get only so much of that child and not the entirety… So, trust is really fundamental… so that learning – meaningful learning – can happen."

These assertions were substantiated in the observations. Both teachers who made these claims ended up relying on the relationship they had with the child during periods of "academic learning," here defined as any period when the children were in structured, didactic learning groups. For example, when David was working with children on math, he frequently relied on the trust he had with children. In his interview, he had said that children might not be willing to admit to not knowing something or be patient enough to work through a problem with him before trust was built. "They have to know that you're not going to say, 'Why do you not know that? All second graders should know that!' [and instead that you'll say], 'Oh, ok, I can help you with that.' Also know that maybe I'm not going to tell them the answer."

During my first observation of David, which occurred more than halfway through the school year, he was working closely with several children on arithmetic, and some were understanding more quickly than others. He had to use his relationship with two children who were distracted in order to remind them to stay on task without alienating them, and his relationship with a third child to guide that child through the mathematical process without revealing the answer. Perhaps because he has now built strong trusting relationships with all the children, he was successful in holding everyone's attention and completing the lesson.

Mechanisms of Trust-Building

One important goal of this study was to help fill a gap in the literature concerning actual strategies teachers employ to gain children's trust. Those "strategies" could be anything from a particular attitude to a classroom routine, but they all shared the common outcome of building children's trust. Here I refer to them as "mechanisms" because while most of them are intentional choices on the part of the teacher, some are an almost-invisible aspect of a larger system, much like small instruments that work in concert to help a larger machine function.

Developmentally appropriate practice.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) as "an approach to teaching grounded in the research on how young children develop and learn... DAP involves teachers meeting young children where they are, both as individuals and as part of a group; and helping each child meet challenging and achievable learning goals" (NAEYC, 2009). DAP's three core components are 1) understanding child development, 2) considering children as individuals, and 3) knowing what is culturally appropriate.

Though they did not always explicitly identify it as such, participants frequently identified trust-building practices that were grounded in DAP. Of the mechanisms discussed that related to developmentally appropriate practice, the three most resonant included consistency and transparency, scaffolding, and playfulness.

Consistency and transparency.

When asked about first-day routines, all participants emphasized the importance of going through classroom expectations with children and then sticking to those expectations throughout the year. "Children like predictability, which means that they like consistency," one teacher explained. "For them to feel safe, they need to know that if x happens, let's say x happens, y then will happen... they need to know that, oh, it's the rules, what the boundaries are, what the limits are. So they can trust the teacher and the environment when the environment responds to them in a consistent manner, like it cannot have one day doing that would be ok and the next day, no, it's not ok anymore."

All other participants agreed that children needed to feel that their environments were stable and predictable. Part of their job as teachers, then, was to make the classroom environment as stable as possible through clearly explained routine and reliable enforcement of boundaries.

However, participants also emphasized how important it was for them to guide children through inevitable disruptions in routine by being explicit and transparent. One participant said, "If I say I'm gonna do something, like let's say I'm gonna read a book to a certain child, and then I get busy, and I don't get to read that book, right, it's my responsibility to tell them, "Oh! We can read this later," and definitely I'll read it later in the day. Or if I [can't get to it, I say], 'I can't get to this now, we're gonna read this another time. I wish we could.'"

This commitment to being as consistent as possible is grounded in the participants' understanding of the children's developmental reality. In one classroom, after the teaching assistants changed their schedule for the spring semester, the teacher noticed the children's confusion. "[The children think,] 'Ahhh! Who's here?' They won't say it, but their bodies show it. So now we talk about [it] and I have a picture, "Who are your teachers today?" ...So then the next thing is where do you see the information… that's another piece, access to information." This teacher's close observation of the children in combination with her understanding of development helped the children feel empowered and informed rather than frightened by something that felt out of their control.

During my observations, consistency and transparency were often of concern to children. For example, in the kindergarten classroom, the children were being introduced to the practice of a morning meditation. They talked through the day's schedule as they usually do during morning meeting, and then the teacher began to explain the idea of meditation. There was an outbreak of confusion; some children began to line up at the door instead of listening. Noticing this, the teacher guided them back to the rug and said, "I know it's confusing because I told you we were going to movement and dance and then I said we were doing meditation first. This is the first time we're doing it this way so we'll take it nice and slow." By acknowledging the change in

routine and then promising to guide them through it, she re-established the children's feeling of safety and they were able to focus again on the activity.

Additionally, in all three of the classrooms, there was a color-coded schedule hanging on the wall by the rug. In the preliterate classrooms, there were small pictures to the left of each word so that the children could access the information without needing to ask. As each transition occurred, the teachers would often point to the next activity on the schedule and anticipate for them what would be coming later in the day. These small moments prevented outbreaks of confusion or fearfulness in the children, who were made to feel confident in what to expect.

Scaffolding.

The term "scaffolding" arises from the Vygotskian theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, which states that children have a "zone" of learning potential that they can reach with an appropriate challenge and an appropriate amount of assistance. The assistance, when an adult breaks down the challenge so that the child can achieve it, is often called *scaffolding*, much like the scaffolding that helps prop up buildings that are in progress.

The teachers in this study used scaffolding to help their children feel successful in class. While scaffolding is typically a practice to further children's cognitive development, it can also further their communication and social skills and therefore contribute to a trusting relationship. Frequently, the demands of interpersonal communication or conflict resolution may be too high for a young child, leading to the child feeling overwhelmed, misunderstood, and mistreated. The ability of an adult to "scaffold" these interpersonal dynamics so that the child feels empowered, heard, and connected is crucial to that child's sense of safety and belongingness in the classroom (Petty, 2009).

One participant, for example, often will illustrate the scene that a child is describing after a conflict occurs. If the children are having trouble with the typical conflict resolution process, she will talk to each child individually and draw their description of what happened, sometimes using thought bubbles or speech bubbles to help clarify. Then she compares the two "scenes" so that the children can more easily understand the other's perspective, while still feeling heard by their teacher. "Once you do that though, the children trust you. [They're thinking,] 'Oh, you're willing to spend time with me, finally somebody's listening to me. They're interested in my story.' So that is very important, in trust. That you want to know, you want to try to understand, and you want to get it right."

Another teacher described a ritual he does on the first day of every year to scaffold the children's self-disclosure and begin the getting-to-know-you process. "On the first day of school I have them bring in a summer story," he said. "It could be anything. It could be a story that they tell or it could be something that fits in their hand, like a shell. They could tell me a story about the shell or like a picture, uh, of what they did this summer, something they did, so that sort of starts to begin trust." Allowing the children to bring a physical anchor for storytelling while also providing freedom to choose what to tell is a perfect embodiment of scaffolding: breaking down a task into manageable pieces that are customizable for the individual child. As another teacher said, "If you can break it into something that [they] can feel successful at, you're on your way."

Playfulness.

Social science researcher Brené Brown has described trust as "marble jar." The idea is based off a marble jar in her daughter's classroom. Her daughter's teacher takes marbles out of the jar after children behave in a way that she feels is negative, and she puts marbles in when the children work together and behave positively. According to Brown, trust works in a similar way:

trust is depleted (marbles removed) after negative interactions and trust is built (marbles added) after positive interactions (Brown, 2015). For young children, everyday positive interactions - moments that would "add marbles" - often center around play.

Two teachers specifically mentioned in their interviews that they prioritize children having fun. When one teacher was asked how he helps children feel at home when they first arrive in his classroom, he identified "the basics of just being [as small as possible, like] on the floor. I lower my voice to almost like a whisper, I try to be as gentle and as fun as possible, and teach them songs and sing." He also mentioned that he prepares his classroom by setting up "really familiar things like Play-Do and you know, lots of things to sort of catch their eye."

The value he placed on having fun together was also evident in observations of his class. While he often played alongside children in the dramatic play area or at the water table, he also infused playfulness into the subtlest moments. Once while the class was listening to a story, the child sitting on the teacher's lap reached up to touch the top of his head. Rather than pushing the child away or reminding him to focus, the teacher took the child's hand and touched it to the hairless part of his head, then the hair on the back of his head, and finally to his beard - presumably so that the child could feel and compare all three textures. Then, looking at the expression on the child's face, the teacher began to laugh, and the child joined in. These benign playful encounters are fundamental to building the kind of trust that can persist through more dramatic moments, like conflict.

Playfulness can also be a way for a teacher to help an anxious child to let their guard down. Another teacher remembered a particular situation where humor helped him begin to build a relationship with a child who did not trust others easily. "I figured out early on, I don't know how I found [out], he loves pretzels… So, the first time I met him I asked him what he'd done

this summer, and I was like, 'I thought I heard that you took a trip to the pretzel planet!' And he thought that was hilarious... it came up again and again and again."

Children as individuals.

All teachers emphasized the importance of relating to children on what one of them called "a human level... I come at it with the idea that kids are not little grownups but they are people, and they deserve to be treated like people and not like robots, either." Seeing children as complete, individual beings with complex inner lives was frequently underscored by teachers in interviews and displayed during observations. The two most important aspects of viewing children as individuals included a focus on "exchanging worlds" with children and building from children's prior experiences.

Exchange of worlds.

"We're in each other's worlds" was how one teacher described the process of getting to know his students. The exchange of worlds is often accomplished through appropriate self-disclosure. All of the teachers discussed the importance of revealing their own backstories to children: discussing their homes and families, discussing things they enjoy doing, and even "how much I like Spider-Man." Whether these disclosures occur through a letter sent home before school starts or through conversations once the year begins, the teachers said that the children enjoy knowing these details and that their feeling of safety is furthered by this understanding.

Teachers also pointed out that it is equally important, if not more important, for them to have and utilize a broad, deep understanding about each child individually. Names are important "because it makes a huge difference when you can call them by name," but names are also just the beginning. Even the smallest details about a child's interests can go a long way in making that child feel connected. One teacher told a story about a new student, hereafter called "Ryan," whose family recently moved to the area from China, and who had to enter the class mid-year.

This transition was certain to be challenging on a number of fronts, as Ryan has been inundated with newness. He is just beginning to learn English while also experiencing his first winter, his first American-style classroom, and even his new English name.

This teacher was able to facilitate Ryan's transition primarily through her understanding of his background and his context. Since she speaks a bit of his first language, Mandarin Chinese, she habitually communicates with him in two languages, first explaining what is going on in Mandarin and then again in English. Knowing that his English name is new to him, she asked his parents in advance to send her his Chinese name and then asked him if he would like her to write his Chinese name and his English name side-by-side on his cubby. She sent the family pictures of all his new teachers, with their names and a blurb about each one. Finally, she "found out what he likes. He likes dinosaurs, so he came in at the right time - he went on a field trip with us and we were looking at dinosaur footprints here at the Department of Art Sciences and Ocean Studies… So he started off in the classroom interacting with new people but engaging in a topic that he likes." All of these steps, chosen because of Ryan's background and context, allowed him to enter the classroom community as smoothly as possible.

Building from prior experiences.

As illustrated by Ryan's story, children's families, races, cultures, ability levels, and languages are crucial elements of their backgrounds. All participants were clear, however, that these facets of identity were not the sole determinants of how a child would react to relationship-building efforts. In other words, the main factor in a child's ability to feel safe was *not* the presence or absence of cultural congruency, but rather their previous experiences. One teacher summed it up by saying, "It depends."

One important consideration was the child's level of exposure to people who shared the identities of the teacher. "If you see difference that is cultural or racial in background, and you have very little or no experience in that culture, or interacting with a group of people belonging to a certain race or ethnicity... you may not be far off to assume that we all begin with some level of discomfort," one teacher of color said, theorizing about children's initial reactions to their first meeting. "Like not willing to put all [of] yourself out there. Right, because you will have some defense because you want to figure out what is this."

Another teacher of color agreed that exposure was important, and added that it may present both a risk and an opportunity. "I'm an African-American man, and if they're not exposed to that, I mean, I might be the first person they see of African descent. And, um, I'm a big man too. I'm not a tiny guy. So they might not be exposed to somebody who's big like me. I try to make myself as small as possible, um, which is kind of funny... my role is really important because if they haven't been exposed to a person of African descent, especially a male, I get to sort of be that person, to break that barrier and show them that yeah, I'm who I am and I may be different from Mommy and Daddy but I'm great too! I'm a lot of fun to be around as well. So, I definitely think there could be a difference and I'm very aware of all of that."

By contrast, the White male teacher I spoke to thought young children would be *less* guarded if they'd never had a White male teacher before. "If you're a student of color and you've never had a positive experience with a white guy, I think this is gonna be hard. I mean, you're just primed for it, it makes sense, it's rational… [and anecdotally], the younger the easier. I taught in Cambridge Public Schools fifth grade for awhile, and a lot of those kids, they'd had [negative] experiences by then and it was very hard to suddenly come in and be like, 'Yeah, but I'm not gonna do that.' [The children would say,] 'I've heard that from like twelve guys, thank

you, I don't care.' In first grade, it's a little bit easier usually, because there's just not a lot of precedent there."

The difference between these testimonies is illustrative both of the majority White student population of the school and the racial dynamics in the country as a whole. Teachers of color are often asked by White people, even children, to be representatives of their entire racial group. These teachers must fight through negative stereotypes about themselves and their group in order to build a child's trust. On the other hand, White teachers are more likely to be judged off of the behavior of other White people in the child's past - a preconception based on a difficult experienced reality.

Separately, children's prior experiences with trauma have an impact on their willingness to form trusting relationships with new adults. One teacher remembered a child who had just been taken from his birth parents and placed with a foster family when he entered the classroom. "If they come from homes where trust has been broken a lot, they may come in with extra baggage where they don't know if they trust anybody," the teacher said. Understanding that particular child's experiences and fears is crucial for teachers to overcome the barrier of trauma and build a connection with the child.

Similarly, if a child has been treated as the "bad kid" in class, that child's behavior will also be informed by their previous experiences. One teacher recalled a child who would not participate in morning meeting. The child knew that he would have trouble following the conventions of morning meeting because his neurological profile made it hard for him to stay still, wait his turn, and tolerate specific sounds. "He didn't want to be yelled at," the teacher explained. "Why would you want to go if you know someone's gonna get mad at you, right? I mean, that's terrible." Understanding what the child was afraid of helped the teacher modify the

typical routine so that the child could feel safe, and begin to trust that no matter his difficulties with impulse control, his teacher would not humiliate him by yelling at him in front of his peers.

Empowerment of children.

Especially for children who are more guarded, teachers tended to follow the child's lead around relationship-building. While they were careful not to ignore any of the children or allow the child to be the only one driving the relationship forward, teachers were attentive to children's signals and gave them space when necessary. When discussing the process of building a relationship with a recently traumatized child, one teacher said, "I would say, 'I know that you don't really trust me and that's ok.' And I would use those words, I would say, 'But I'm hoping you'll give me a chance.' And not really saying 'You have to trust me' or 'We have to figure this out.' More like, 'Hopefully you'll give me a chance to build my trust with you. And I know that might be really hard for you to do.'" For a child who has felt powerless and been abused by adults in the past, being given a choice is hugely significant in relationship-building. It is important for the child to learn to trust the teacher in their own time, according to their own rules, rather than being forced into displays of affection (i.e. "Come give me a hug!").

Accordingly, teachers stressed the importance of following the timelines of individual children. "It takes different amounts of time, it takes different amounts of effort," one teacher said. "There's some kids that [say] 'I love you so much' really early on, and you've got them. And then others [are] quieter with their emotions, they're not gonna go into that, [and] that's ok, I don't need them to say that." Another teacher agreed that a combination of patience and adjustment to the individual needs of the child was essential, especially in situations where the child has reason not to trust adults.

In those situations, it is even more important for teachers to pay close attention to even the subtlest cues from children. One teacher recalled a child who was particularly troubled and

would often get into physical fights with other children. "When I would approach him when he was upset, I never approached him from the front, because he would sort of hit you, punch you, bite you," the teacher explained. "I'd approach him from the side or the back. And when I'd come up from behind him I would just try things, like I would try hugging him, like from the back. And I finally eventually just scooped him up. And when I did that… I could feel his body melt back into mine." After he noticed that the child reacted well to being picked up, this teacher began to rock the child like a baby, "because he was never really rocked as a baby, it seemed, because he was really neglected." Through this gentle, restorative touch, the child was able to be calmed without punishment, and slowly was able to trust that this teacher truly did not mean him harm.

Assume good intentions.

All of the teachers in this study shared a philosophy about children, stated this way by one teacher about the meaning of trust: "If we have a trusting relationship, I expect that they don't wanna do harm to me, and that means that if that's what they're doing, there's probably a reason for it, not that kid is a rotten little kid… kids wanna do their best, and if they're not, something's getting in the way." This philosophy was named "Kids Do Well If They Can" by Dr. Ross Greene, a clinical psychologist who specializes in non-punitive problem solving. "Your philosophy is going to guide your actions, especially when the going gets tough," Greene explained in a video where he introduced his model of Collaborative and Proactive Solutions. Greene went on to explain that the assumption of good intentions completely changes the role of the teacher when challenges arise. If the teacher believes that "kids do well if they wanna," their role is to make the child *want* to do well when they are struggling. This idea is predicated on the assumption that the child was not motivated to do well already, and that therefore the child needs more incentives. However, if the philosophy of practice is "kids do well if they can," the teacher

assumes that the child is already trying their best. In that case, the teacher's role is to figure out what is getting in the child's way, and help remove that obstacle (Greene, 2010).

This philosophy was crucial to help teachers build relationships around obstacles. One teacher recalled, "[One child and I] had to start building some trust – very difficult. Um, because he's a kid who is so out of touch with his inner life that if you said, 'How are you doing?' he'd say, 'I don't know.' First impression, he's being a smart-ass. Get to know him, that is actually the answer that he has! He does not know how he's doing! Wow, that's hard to get an in." This teacher needed to use empathy and perspective-taking skills to overcome his first impression, which would have resulted in a punitive or dismissive response, in order to address the actual challenge: the child does not know how to look inward. In that case, no amount of "carrot or the stick" measures would have incentivized the child to answer the question differently. Instead, the child would likely feel misunderstood, alienated, and angry. The teacher's assumption of good intentions allowed him to move past his first impression, to invest time into taking the perspective of the child, and then to respond effectively by scaffolding the process of checking in with oneself. As a result, the child learned important social-emotional skills *and* saw that the teacher was invested in seeing the authentic child, and invested in lifting him up.

Assuming good intentions, even in the smallest moments, went far in creating a classroom that felt safe for students. Responding to children's energetic outbursts with a nod and a calming touch on the back, as one teacher did during a storytime observation, was a gentle and effective way to remind children to practice stillness. Another teacher, in response to a child's baffling decision to take off his shoes and put them in his cubby before sitting on the rug, explained to her TA, "We cannot bring our boots in here - I think that's what he's remembering." Later that day, when a child's father came to the class to read a story for her birthday, the

children were not responding to the father's questions. Rather than telling the children to "speak up!", the teacher rephrased his questions to be more straightforward and asked them again. She assumed that the children were either confused or distracted, and sure enough, they started calling out answers as soon as she made the questions more understandable. Though these moments seem small, the ability to react to even a subtle challenge with compassion rather than punishment makes a huge difference in encouraging children to take risks and bring their full selves into the classroom.

Classroom community.

All teachers expressed the importance of building holistic trust with a child in which the child felt safe as members of a community. "I am trying to build a relationship with the individual student," one teacher explained, "but we're also trying to build a community together where people feel comfortable." The teachers built classroom community primarily by encouraging children to feel that they have an important role in the classroom, helping them interact meaningfully with each other, and fostering empathy.

For example, teachers had rotating classroom "jobs" for children in the class. "At some early point in the year, we come up with classroom jobs, and I don't assign them," one teacher said. "We talk about them. We brainstorm, we vote, we come up with what's going to work this year for these guys." This democratic process of determining what needs to be done in the classroom ensures that children feel like they have agency over what happens in the classroom, and that their voice matters. More broadly, having a classroom job can assure children of their importance as a contributing member of the classroom community. For example, in one classroom, the teacher had a rotating assignment of who would be the line leaders and who would be the line enders. As they were lining up one day to go to Movement & Dance, she called out, "And now our important people, the line enders." She reminded the class why this job was

significant so that the children did not feel embarrassed or disappointed to be at the end of the line but rather felt proud to be valuable members of the classroom community.

Teachers also helped build community by fostering meaningful interactions between children. In addition to enforcing norms around how to interact kindly with one another and helping manage conflict resolution, many teachers made sure that they had routines to help children share about themselves. To celebrate a child's birthday, for example, one classroom would have an adult caregiver come in, show pictures of the child from each year of their life, and tell short stories about the child. This way, each child would have the opportunity to share their histories with their classroom friends, and the other children were able to ask questions and engage with that child in a meaningful way.

One teacher talked about explicitly helping her students practice empathy and perspective-taking in order to foster community. One powerful example was when the class was preparing for the arrival of Ryan, the new student. The teacher sat the children down before he arrived and asked them to think back to when they were new to the classroom. What had that felt like for them? What had made them feel more comfortable? "So there was one student who says… 'You'd better give him a cubby! You'd better do this,' and so she started listing all these things that I know I have to do but she was the one [who said], 'Give him a cubby, make sure he has a name pin, blah blah blah,' she was just listing all the things that I need to do." The teacher expressed excitement that this child was able to remember what had made her feel comfortable when she was new, and apply it to Ryan's situation. And, she said, the conversations they had to prepare had worked. "[Every time] they hear [Ryan] speak English, they're so excited! And they would go and talk to him. So it's not out of fear, but 'oh, we're in this together, with – we're all gonna try to [help],' because I set it up that way. Like he's here, he's learning, not just from me,

but we're all gonna try – most of the English he's gonna learn is from you, not from me, you know. So they're very eager. Because I set it up that way." Ryan's adjustment, therefore, was facilitated by her choice to make sure the students were ready to welcome him into their classroom community.

Institutional Factors Affecting Trust

While many of the trust-building strategies employed by teachers are applicable across situations, there are a number of institutional factors that intersect with and complicate the process. It's important to consider the ways in which environmental factors impact the tactics teachers use and their effectiveness.

Anti-Bias Education (ABE).

The four goals of anti-bias education (ABE) as written by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, the "founders" of ABE, are as follows:

1. Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

2. Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections.

3. Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

4. Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions. (2010)

The outcomes of ABE are relevant and valuable to children of all identities, backgrounds, and interests (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Because early childhood is a time when children are beginning to learn about and internalize biases, ABE is implemented at the lab school. This "occurs through both proactive, planned curriculum as well as natural 'teachable moments' that

arise in children's social interactions, conversations, and play. Teachers also carefully think about what children need in terms of individual and group development throughout the year," according to available literature provided by the school.

Especially for young children of color, an intentional emphasis on anti-bias education has a significant effect on their developing sense of belongingness in the classroom.

Curriculum.

One teacher explicitly discussed the way her anti-bias curriculum intersected with her trust-building routines. After introducing the idea on the very first day, she returns all year to the consistent message that her students are "safe, strong, free, and powerful" exactly as they are. "The only rule that you need to know from me really is that everyone should stay safe, everyone should be able to feel themselves like strong, feel free to be who they are, feel free to choose, as long as they are not making other people unsafe, or not strong. And then finally that we are all powerful just the way we are," she explained. On her classroom wall is a huge banner with the words "the land of the safe, strong, free, and powerful" painted across it. She introduces this idea through a storybook about a spider, Anansi, who comes from West African and Caribbean folklore. "The spiders in this story are powerful, you know, they have special gifts, so are spiders really powerful? And then – they are! They're very – they are amazing! So we learn about that and then, you know, you are powerful just the way you are and that's how, that's the connection that I have. So using that as the foundation for the whole school year now."

When asked, this teacher connected this messaging to children's feeling of safety. She explained that having a touchstone to return to helped children feel that their environment was both welcoming and predictable. The connection between the curriculum and the classroom's values allows them to see that their teacher "practices what she preaches" - that is, there is

stability across the espoused classroom rules and the things they learn. "It's all under the same umbrella," their teacher explained.

Especially for a child of color, explicit discussions about identity prevent feelings of erasure and give them a place to process, allowing them to bring their full selves into the classroom. This teacher recalled one child who had been adopted from an African country by a White mother at the age of 3. Understandably, the child was struggling to understand his heritage and his history, and so he was not ready to participate in a classroom discussion about ancestors. However, the conversation had evidently gotten him thinking, because his teacher "saw him approaching the map, and then he was pointing [to the place he was born]." The inclusion of anti-bias curriculum, where the child was encouraged to reflect on his identity in class, helped him bring out a vulnerable, painful part of himself that he had been suppressing.

Anti-bias curriculum also helps children from the culture of power accept others. When Ryan was going to come to the class from China, the teacher held that same class discussion about where the children's ancestors are from. "[I say], 'I told you he's from China,' and they all know, 'Oh! My aunt's from, or my grandma's from India' … [because] we had that conversation already… not everyone is born here in the United States. [And some of them say,] 'Well I'm not from Medford, so I was born in Boston, I'm not from Medford!' (laughs)... So they have to be not-from… and then the cultural and racial [aspects], that just becomes who he is." Normalizing many types of diversity through discussion helps children develop nuanced conceptions of each other that are not based on stereotypes or internalized ideas of false superiority. As a result, children of color are less likely to be bullied, more likely to feel centered rather than peripheral in the classroom community, and more able to be their authentic selves with their teacher.

Home-school connection.

Especially for young children, the connection between home and school is crucial to trust and belongingness. "Family engagement," a term that refers to the strength-based approach of integrating children's caregivers into their education process, has been on the rise due to research that shows its long-term benefits for children (Halgunseth, 2009). Accordingly, all participants in this study highlighted the importance of working closely with families to earn children's initial trust, to ensure continuity of care, and to show value to children's cultures.

When telling the story of Ryan's first time visiting the classroom, one teacher said, "He also looks at his parents, how his parents relate to me. The parents are smiling, and I'm smiling, or we are communicating, and the parents will say, 'Ok, we'll reinforce that at home,' and I'm saying, 'Oh that's important to him? Ok.' ...I make room for it in the classroom. So that shows a home and school connection, it feels very assuring to the child. And so that's where the trust is also built. Trust is also your relationship to the parents." In other words, a child may react to their initial feelings of uncertainty by looking to the parents, and seeing what their reactions are. If the parents are smiling and communicating well with the teacher, the child may feel reassured. However, if the parents seem uncertain, the child may feel more anxious. This dynamic is especially important when a child is facing a teacher of an unfamiliar race or culture. "[A child] will look at the parents, how the parents relate to other people in the classroom who are all strangers to you and say, 'Is this ok for me to be in?' So, if a culture is different, it's the same thing. The subtle cues are there for them." For example, if White caregivers react with distrust to a teacher of color due to internalized biases, the child is more likely to distrust that teacher. Similarly, if caregivers of color react with distrust to a White teacher based on previous negative experience, the child is more likely to start off feeling unsafe with that teacher.

It is therefore extremely important for teachers to build trust with families before the year even begins. At this school, teachers often do this through a Welcome Packet, which has photos of all the teachers and TAs as well as some information about each of them. Teachers also do home visits with the younger children, which is "a big move for [the children]. Because our relationship changes after that… I notice that they'll tell me more about their worlds, or they'll look at me differently, in the sense of, when they come in in the morning, instead of being kind of nervous or scared, they might look at me and say hi or smile at me, and make a connection with me in some way."

Home visits are also important because they allow the teacher to adopt some practices of the parents. "You get to see where children come from and what their environment is and how parents speak to them, how they treat them," one teacher said about home visiting. "If I notice that the parents use maybe a louder tone, right, when they're disciplining them... I might use that same tone to get their attention. And not be like 'Oh, Tommy, could you possibly stop hitting Mary?' I'll just say, 'Hey, stop! Stop hitting her right now!' Like I might change that tone to get that child's attention." Establishing continuity for children as much as possible, even in the absence of cultural congruency, may help a child feel comfortable in the classroom and establish a relationship with their teacher.

Finally, family engagement is an especially important tool for children who are not part of the culture of power. "[I might] invite that parent to come in and just read a book to the class," one teacher said of international families. "Or [invite them to] do an art project or anything they specialize in… and put that child in the center. Where I might not ask another child whose parents are not maybe culturally different or from another place as quickly." The involvement of caregivers in the classroom shows children of color that they do not have to leave their identities

at home and that the teacher and the other students value them. This choice, like anti-bias education, may allow those children to bring their full selves into the classroom more easily and not feel that they have to fragment their identities in order to have relationships with their teachers or their peers.

Manifestations of Trust

The final question I asked teachers was whether they felt they had effectively established trust with their students at this point, about halfway through the school year. All of them said they had. The way they could tell that they had built a two-way trusting relationship, they said, was the authenticity on both sides.

Authenticity of child.

When children feel safe to be their authentic selves, teachers said, they knew that they had built a trusting relationship. That authenticity manifested through self-disclosure, vulnerability, and willingness to experience conflict on the part of the child. "Trust means that the child feels a level of safety to reveal to the other person their feelings or personal information… without holding back… They will tell you about home news," one teacher said. "[And if they don't trust you,] the child will not tell you personal information. Or if something happens, he will just say, "Oh yeah I'm ok," or "That didn't happen," or "Oh, I didn't do that," or things like that. They will start doing that. And it's not because they are covering themselves, don't – it's because they don't trust you with the information."

Other teachers corroborated that children start to share more about themselves when they begin developing trust. Another teacher said that children start to show him what they can do. For example, a child might show him that they know how to read, or how to jump from structure to structure on the playground, or how to use scissors. "They [hadn't] shown me that! And now they're showing me that. So, it's different for each child, but sort of now they're all sort of

showing in their way that they feel comfortable now." During an observation of this teacher's classroom, I saw a child reach out his hand to the teacher and say, "I missed you over break." The teacher took the child's hand and swung it back and forth, saying, "I missed you too, buddy." The child talking openly about his feelings seemed to be another form of self-disclosure, all of which signify to teachers that they are making progress earning a child's trust.

Teachers are also heartened by a child's willingness to be vulnerable. One teacher said that he is especially touched when a child comes to him when they get hurt at school or have an accident: "I help them… and they let me do it. When they let me in their world, and it's something very personal, or something very hard, then I know I've built that trust, too. That they don't… just ask for their mommy, they just let me do it. So that's a real indicator." Another teacher agreed that when a child comes to her when they need something, she knows their relationship is beginning to build. Even something as small as admitting they need help on math homework, the third teacher said, is a sign of growing trust.

Willingness to experience conflict is another important indicator of trust. "Now all of a sudden [children] are able to get really mad at me about homework, or get really mad at another child, and get mad that they didn't get that toy, and I love to tell the parent that. They're kind of embarrassed and I'm like, 'No, this is a big step, it means that they feel comfortable here to show me that.' So that's another test and when this child has been so polite and so accommodating to everybody, and so flexible, when they're not, when they become inflexible one day I'm like, 'yes!' (laughs)" Children's imperfection as an important indicator of trust was echoed by another teacher, who said, "[When the child trusts you, they know] that when they make a mistake you'll still like them… that they can share with the grownup their personal feelings… or even saying, 'I

can get mad at you.'" In other words, if a child believes that their relationship with the adult is strong enough to endure the presence of conflict, the child is beginning to trust the adult.

Fallibility of adult.

If the relationship is truly a trusting one, the adult can also be authentic by admitting their own fallibility. All teachers stressed that everyone in the classroom needs to have permission to make mistakes, themselves included. One teacher explained that this is the only way to *maintain* trust, because even if a child trusts her at the beginning of the year, that trust can be broken at any time. "[Trust is] something that you have to earn… and keep earning. So the best thing is to be consistent and be your – be authentic. And if you make a mistake you can say 'I'm sorry, I made a mistake.' And I hurt their feelings. Even grown-ups should be authentic, or, be forthright, say, 'I made a mistake. I'm sorry.'" Since it is impossible for the teachers to do everything perfectly, the only way to maintain a child's trust is to build in the expectation that mistakes do happen and that the only way forward is to apologize. This shows that the teacher respects the child's feelings while also assuring the child that mistakes are normal and can be fixed.

During my observations, I witnessed a number of apologies from teacher to student. One teacher, as he reviewed math homework, realized that he had forgotten to ask the children to show their work in the directions. He apologized, saying, "I should've written that on the homework. I just wasn't thinking. It's not your fault." Another teacher apologized after mixing up a student's name. This expectation that the teacher will make mistakes and apologize for them allows the children to still feel safe in the relationship when mistakes do happen. It also allows them to trust that the teacher is still in control and will do whatever needs to be done to get things back on track.

Discussion

The results of this study provide for a more holistic understanding of trust-building in schools. They underscore that student-teacher trust is the foundation for meaningful learning in classrooms and complicate the ways that trust is defined. The findings also illuminate the importance of the context of the teacher and the context of the child in building trust, and provide specific insight into the actual strategies that teachers use to build children's trust.

The bulk of the results section sheds light on the first research question, "Through what mechanisms do teachers at this school build trust with their students?" While every teacher had different strategies, the findings highlighted common themes that teachers found effective in creating a trusting relationship. The summary of those themes is represented in Figure 1, found at the beginning of the results section.

The second research question was, "How are [trust-building] mechanisms altered to account for a lack of cultural congruency, if at all?" This question turned out to be the most difficult to answer, and requires multiple levels of analysis to understand. To begin, it is helpful to look back at the literature. Mistry and Wu (2010) developed a theoretical framework that is well-supported by the results of this study. They explain that "minority" children are faced with an immensely complex task when it comes to making meaning of their own identities in a diverse setting. "For children from culturally diverse backgrounds, the processes of appraising and navigating multiple self-representations and understandings that have to be negotiated and resolved are central dimensions of their developing social identities. Further, these developmental processes occur, and are situated in circumstances unique to their lived experience as minorities," they write (p. 7). Their conceptual framework frames community characteristics and the familial construct as "mutually constitutive, or embodied in each other" (p. 16). This means that the objective realities about the community, such as its demographic

characteristics, intersect on equal ground with the attributes of the family and the way the family makes meaning out of the environment they live in. This interplay is further situated within the individual child, who constructs an understanding of their community in relation to themselves through the lens of their developmental trajectory, their values, their families, and their cognitive patterns.

This complex and mutually constructive model of a child's identity development intersects well with this study's findings on children's initial willingness to trust. The original research questions were derived in order to better understand the mechanisms of trust-building, and to learn about the role of cultural congruency. While I expected to find that cultural or racial mismatch would largely determine a teacher's selection of trust-building strategies, the results did not reflect this expectation. Rather, a more nuanced picture emerged: that racial identity was important, but it was not the only important element. "The cultural and the racial, that just becomes who he is," one teacher said of a child newly arrived from China, and it was this idea that was reflected in the findings. As Mistry and Wu (2010) clarify, the child's relationship to their identity and the ways that they make meaning are constantly changing as the child develops and gathers more experiences. In this study, the child's meaning-making around identity is much more significant than the fact of the identity itself.
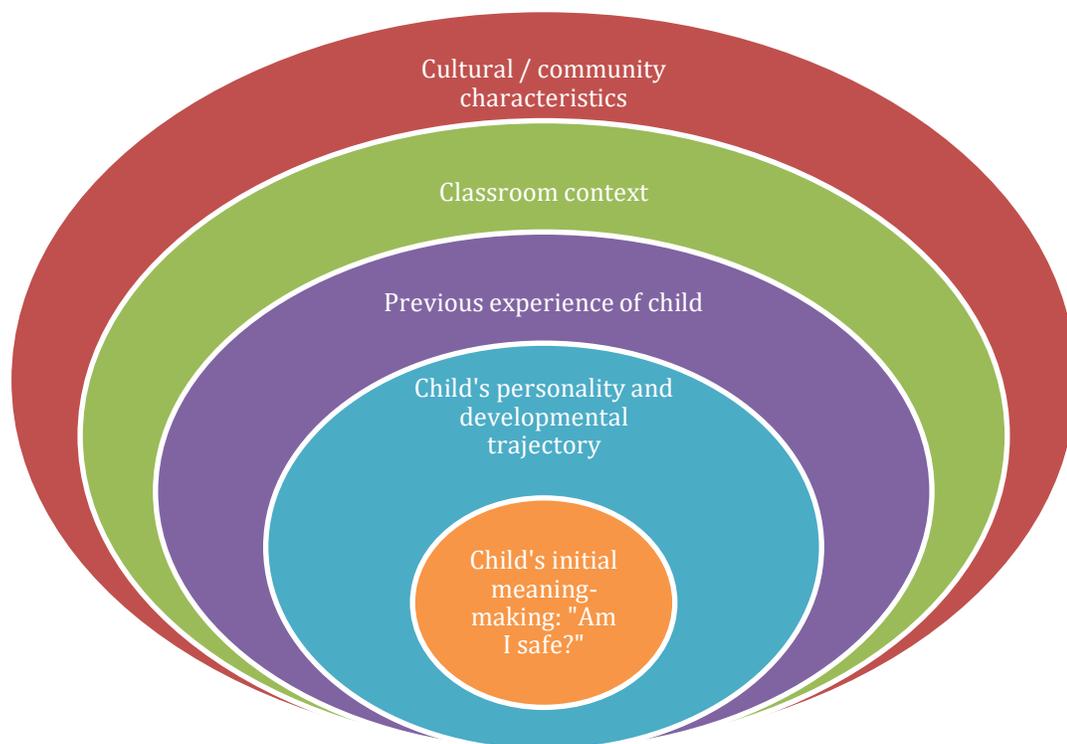
Fig. 2: Child's initial meaning-making about safety in their classroom.

Figure 2 is not meant to encompass all the findings of this study, but rather to illustrate

the ways that a child's identity intersects with their initial understanding of their safety within the

classroom. This provides an indirect but illuminating piece of the response to the second research

question. Looking at this diagram, it becomes clear that trust-building mechanisms may need to

be altered to account for a lack of cultural congruency, but that there are also numerous other

factors that go into the child's feeling of safety.

To further understand the second research question, it is also important to examine how

the child's meaning-making about their identity interacted with the teacher's understanding of

that process. The way that the teacher understands the child's relationship to their identity is

what will determine what mechanisms the teacher uses to try to earn that child's trust. While the

teacher's meaning-making process is highly dependent on the individual teacher, just as the

child's meaning-making process is highly dependent on the individual child, the teacher's

professional context also plays a role. For example, the site of this study was a lab school attached to a major research university in a part of the country with broadly liberal values. It has significant access to resources, low student-teacher ratios, racially diverse leadership, and a small student body. Its curriculum is responsive and explicitly anti-bias, and its teachers are highly educated and invested in their jobs. All of these things, in conjunction with individual factors, impact the teachers' capacities to build trust with children. Figure 3, once again, illustrates the ways that all of these factors are interdependent, and therefore provides another small piece of the puzzle in understanding the full complexity of the results.
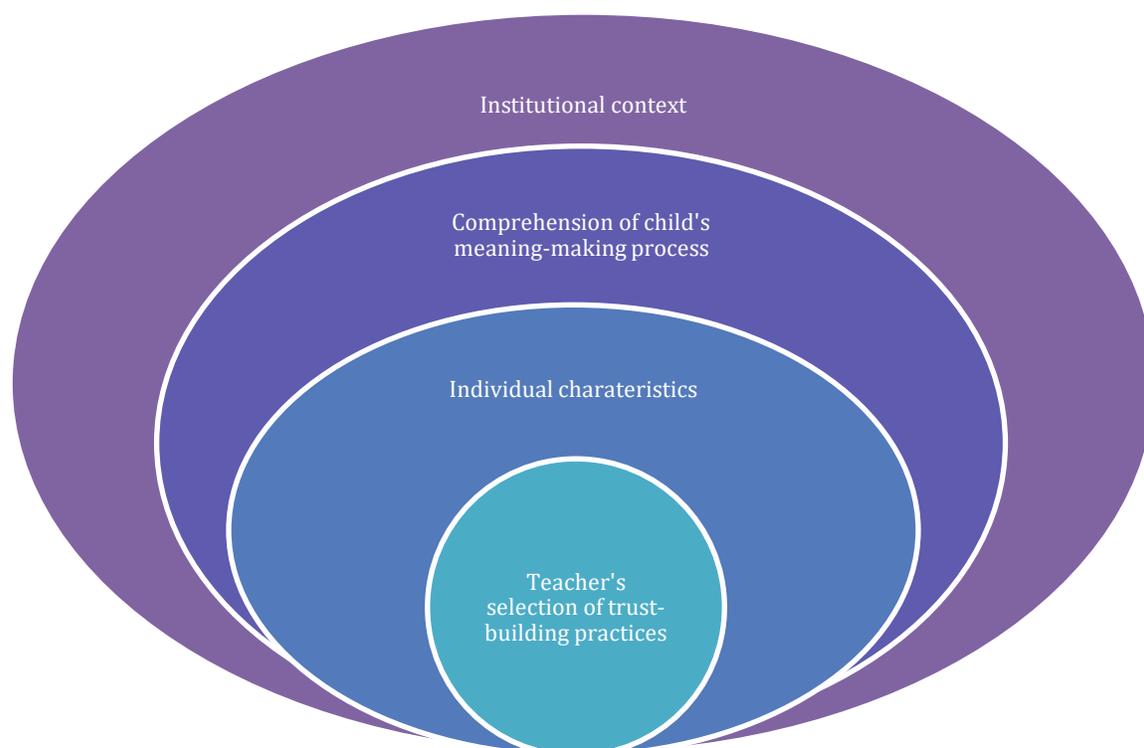

Fig.3: Teacher's selection of trust-building practices

To combine these two interpretations of the data and provide a more complete response to the second research question, see Figure 4. To reiterate, the findings of this study indicated that the holistic context of the teacher, as outlined in Fig. 2, and the holistic context of the child,

as outlined in Fig. 1, are the main determinants of how they collectively build a relationship. The teacher selects appropriate trust-building practices from those outlined in the results section, the child continuously re-evaluates the situation to ensure their own safety, and over time, the two achieve a trusting relationship.
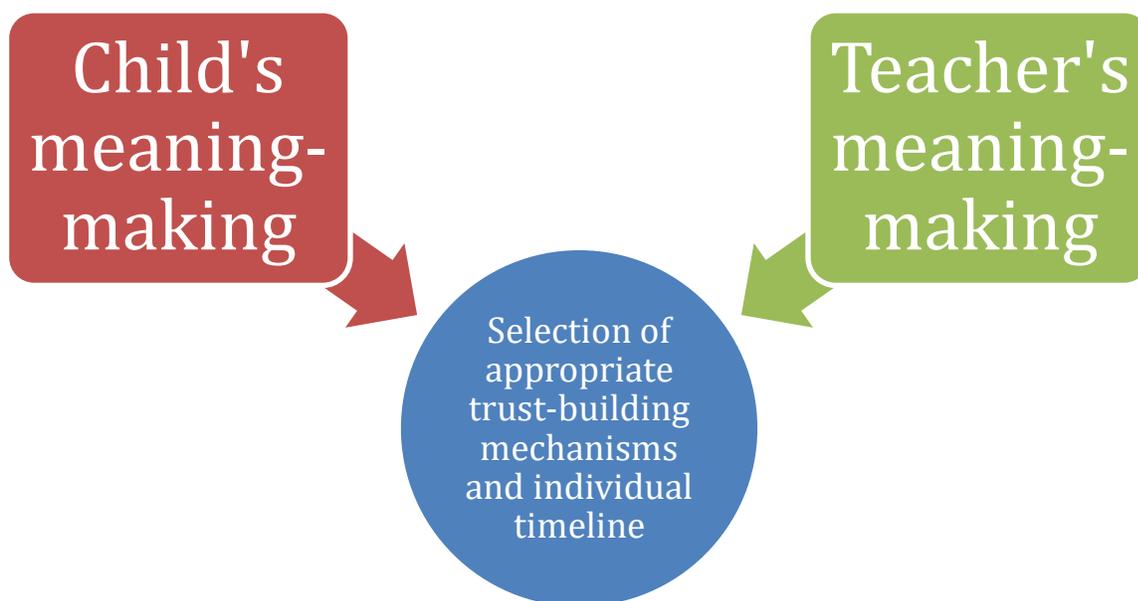
Child's meaning-making

Teacher's meaning-making

Selection of appropriate trust-building mechanisms and individual timeline

Fig. 4: Combined model of trust-building

The third and final research question, "To what degree do teachers feel these adjustments are effective at establishing a trusting relationship with children?" is dependent, it seems, on how well teachers can accomplish the task outlined in Figure 4. The teachers in this study, as shown in the results, felt confident completing this process and therefore felt that they had established a strong, trusting relationship with every one of their students.

The key strength of this study is its zoomed-in perspective on the complex reality of trust-building between teachers and young children. The small sample size and depth of

information allows the research to encompass real-life nuances that broader-scale studies often miss, and, as a result, create a more comprehensive framework of the trust-building process.

Limitations

There are real limits to generalizability, both due to the small sample size, the specific context of this lab school, and the highly individual nature of the subject matter. The perspectives on trust-building offered in this study are offered within a very specific context, and would likely be quite different if they had come from teachers working in a different setting. Though there are clearly resonant themes, one of the most important factors in a teacher's trust-building practices is their context, and a key limitation of this study was that it did not include teachers from other contexts. This school, while racially and ethnically diverse, still had a majority White student population and is part of a majority White research institution, which affects both the distribution of power and the assumptive world of children. Further research might include teachers and students from different districts, different types of schools, and different personal backgrounds.

Additionally, as a White American female who aspires to be a teacher, I am hardly without bias as a researcher; my political values and educational background generally mirrored that of my participants, and we were both encompassed by the same university. Furthermore, my identity as a member of the culture of power certainly leaves me with significant blind spots. Those blind spots are compounded by the fact that all participants opted not to member-check, meaning that all the conclusions drawn in the study are my own attempt to make sense of the data. As an individual researcher, not part of a team, my own perspective has undoubtedly shaped the way the data has been organized and presented.

There also is the possibility of reactivity, defined by Anastas (1999) as the "change induced in what is observed by the process of observing it" (p. 336). However, this school's status as a lab school may have minimized those disruptions. Reactivity in observational studies occurs when an element is introduced that is not usually there, and within the context of a lab school, the presence of an observer is a nearly constant element. Additionally, my observations were all conducted behind a black screen, meaning that I was unlikely to be visible to teachers or to children. Therefore, the effect of reactivity on the validity of this study is likely to be minimal.

If I could do this study over again with more resources, I might have added the perspectives of children and families. While centering the voices of teachers was intentional, it would have been interesting to hear from children and families about how they came to trust their teachers, and how they made meaning from that process. As it stands, my understanding of the child's role in the relationship comes through the eyes of the teachers, and the results could be strengthened if they included the child's own voice.

Implications

Though the results are not widely generalizable, this study provides a helpful framework in considering trust-building. It emphasizes the importance of holistic child-rearing by showing that a child's initial willingness to trust is highly influenced by prior experience with racism and trauma. Raising children in resourced, identity-safe communities will have a direct effect on their ability to engage in meaningful learning as a young child, and, accordingly, pay dividends on their outcomes as adults. Therefore, this study corroborates the narrative that schools can make meaningful strides in changing children's lives, but that policies that protect children and families - such as Section 8 Housing, in-home services, reduced housing segregation, and many more - are also crucial in promoting healthy development and, accordingly, school engagement.

This study also shows the importance of well-resourced classrooms for children, with low adult-child ratios. Many of the trust-building mechanisms in this study would not be possible if head teachers had not been able to spend one-on-one time with children and differentiate instruction to meet children's needs. The developmentally appropriate practices used by teachers were also facilitated by both the physical school environment and the school's proximity to cutting-edge developmental research. The strategies teachers used were made possible by the well-resourced context, as well as their own rich educational and experiential backgrounds.

In sum, this study highlighted the ways that the smallest of things can have far-reaching positive effects. A low-cost intervention like family engagement practices, for example, can go far in building trust with a child, which then allows the child to feel safe in the classroom, engage in the academic material, and begin to receive the well-documented benefits of early education. This relatively subtle method of change is often undervalued both in the literature on child's development and in the national conversation about education reform. Sometimes, this study indicates, it is unnecessary to turn our entire model of education on its head. Sometimes, all children need to access the rich benefits of education is a little more humanity.

Conclusion

The research detailed here provides an in-depth examination of teachers' trust-building practices with children from highly variable backgrounds. The findings emphasize that the process is complex and individual, with no single element determining the way the process will play out. Background and experience on both sides plays an important role, as does the context of the institution they are part of. While the findings shed light on the mechanisms used by teachers in this particular study, it is clear that the specifics of those mechanisms are less

important than the determination of teachers who are empowered with education and resources

to create spaces where children can feel safe.

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Appendix A

Individual Recruitment Email

Dear Lead Teachers,

My name is Tess Ross-Callahan and I am a senior & a Child Development major here at Tufts. My senior thesis is an investigation into the ways that teachers of young children build trust with their students, especially across lines of difference. I am writing to you to invite you to participate in this study.

 If you decide to participate in this study, you will participate in a 1-hour individual interview about the ways you build relationships with children. You will also participate in 2 half-hour classroom observations, preceding and following your interview. (The total time commitment for you outside of your regular routine is only 1 hour.) I would like to audio record your interview in order to have accurate transcriptions of your language, but if you do not want to be recorded, you can still participate in this research opportunity! Whatever you decide about recording, none of your identifying information nor that of children will be shared.

 No financial compensation can be offered, but your participation will contribute to knowledge about building trust with typically underserved children.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please contact me at (phone number) or (email address). If you would like to discuss the opportunity further in person, please let me know and we can set up a time to meet and discuss it.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Tess Ross-Callahan

Appendix B: **Individual Consent Forms**

**TUFTS UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF CHILD STUDY & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY**

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Tess Ross-Callahan

CONTACT DETAILS:

Tel: (781)-290-7088
Email: tess.ross_callahan@tufts.edu

STUDY TITLE: Beyond Competence: Examining Mechanisms of Cross-Cultural Trust Building
with Elementary School Students

PURPOSE AND DURATION: This study involves research on trust-building mechanisms
between elementary school teachers and their students, especially across lines of difference.
We expect that it will take approximately 1 hour of your time, plus two thirty-minute classroom
observations.

PROCEDURES: You will be interviewed about your experiences with trust building and
observed in your routine interactions with children. If you consent to the recording, the
interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and deleted, and your name and other identifiers will be
stored separately from the data in a secure location. You will also be observed for half an hour
before and after your interview. No identifying information will be recorded about children and no
interactions with children will take place. In the observation sessions, I will mainly be looking at
the level of student engagement, the way that student behavior is managed, and the level of
warmth between you and your students.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORT: There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort associated with this
study.

BENEFITS: There are no direct benefits to you besides the educational experience of
participating in the study. However, we expect that the results of this study will add to the body
of knowledge on cross-cultural trust building with elementary-aged children.

CONFIDENTIALITY: The results of this study may be archived in the Tisch Library. However,
your name or other identifiers will not be used in any publication or teaching materials.

COMPENSATION: None

REQUEST FOR MORE INFORMATION: You may ask more questions about the study at any
time. Please e-mail the principal investigator at tess.ross_callahan@tufts.edu or telephone
(781)-290-7088 with any questions or concerns about the study. In addition, you may contact
Lara Sloboda at the Office of the Institutional Review Board at (617) 627-3417.

WITHDRAWAL OF PARTICIPATION: Your participation is voluntary. You can opt not to
participate without penalty. Should you decide at any time during the study that you no longer
wish to participate, you may withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation without
penalty or loss of benefits.

Tufts SBER IRB #1710031
Approved: November 20, 2017
Valid Until: November 19, 2018

RECORDING: I agree to be recorded. Yes / No

SIGNATURE: I confirm that I understand the purpose of the research and the study procedures. I understand that I may ask questions at any time and can withdraw my participation without prejudice. I have read this consent form. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study.

_____

Participant Signature Date

_____

Printed Name of Participant

_____

Researcher Signature Date

_____

Printed Name of Researcher

Appendix C

Sample Interview Questions

1. How do you define trust?

2. What role do you think student-teacher trust plays in the classroom?

3. What are your first-day routines? Are any of them related to building trust?

4. How can you tell when a child trusts you?

5. Do you think trust-building is complicated by racial or cultural difference? Why or why not?

6. If yes, how do you modify your typical trust-building routines to account for cultural differences?

    a. Can you tell me about a specific situation that you had to work to earn a child's trust? What were the complicating factors? How did it turn out?

7. To what extent do you feel there is mutual trust between you and your current students? Why?

Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Approval

Tufts UNIVERSITY | Office of the Vice Provost for Research

November 21, 2017 | Notice of Action

IRB Study # 1710031 | Status: ACTIVE

ATTENTION: BEFORE CONDUCTING ANY RESEARCH, PLEASE READ THE <u>ENTIRETY</u> OF THIS NOTICE AS IT CONTAINS IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT PROPER STUDY PROCEDURES.

Title: Beyond Competence: Examining Mechanisms of Cross-Cultural Trust Building with Elementary School Students

PI: Tess Ross-Callahan
Faculty Advisor: Christy McWayne

The PI is responsible for all information contained in this notice of action and as listed on the Social, Behavioral, Educational IRB website: http://viceprovost.tufts.edu/sberirb/researcher-responsibilities/.

Only copies of approved stamped consent forms and other study materials may be utilized when conducting your study.

This research protocol now meets the requirements set forth by the Office for Human Research Protections in 45 CFR 46 under Expedited Category 6 &7.

Reviewed 11/20/2017 – Expires 11/19/2018

- Approved for 85 participants for the duration of the study.

   Protocol Management:
   - All translated study documents must be submitted for review, approval, and stamping prior to use.
   - For all changes to the protocol, submit: *Request for Protocol Modification* form
   - All Adverse Events and Unanticipated Problems must be reported to the Office of the IRB promptly (no later than 7 calendar days after first awareness of the problem) using the appropriate forms.
   - Six weeks prior to the expiration of the protocol on 11/19/2018, investigators must submit either a *Request for Continuing Review* or a *Request for Study Closure*
   - All forms can be found at: **http://viceprovost.tufts.edu/sberirb/submission-process/submit/**

IRB Administrative Representative Initials: _____