

**“I Know I Can Do Harder Work”: Students’ Perspectives on Teacher Distrust in an
Urban Mathematics Classroom**

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Abstract

Teacher turnover broadly refers to changes in a teacher’s classroom or school assignment, either during or at the end of an academic school year (Ingersoll, 2001). Though this phenomenon affects many schools to some degree, it is especially problematic in urban settings (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). This qualitative study examined the perspectives of five Black urban students on the experience of teacher turnover in their 7th grade Pre-Algebra classroom. Findings suggest that these students highly valued the interpersonal features of their relationship with their initial teacher, and described the types of teacher behavior that they associated with expressions of a distrusting relationship with their subsequent teacher. Specifically, the data indicated that the absence of a teacher’s trust negatively affected students’ mathematics experience and learning. Concluding comments focus on the importance of trustful student teacher relationships to promote academic and interpersonal continuity, and to better attend to the needs of urban students in cases of teacher turnover.

Keywords: Black Students Perspectives, Distrust, Teacher Turnover

Introduction

Medina was a 13-year-old Black female student attending a predominantly Black urban middle high school. She aspired to become a nurse practitioner and was aware of the importance of doing well in her secondary mathematics courses. At the beginning of her seventh-grade year, Medina was able to pursue her interest in mathematics with the support of a teacher she trusted. Medina described Mrs. Brown as someone who listened to her students and taught mathematics through hands-on activities and projects. This positive relationship was interrupted in November when Mrs. Brown accepted a position at another school in the same district. Medina struggled to connect with her new teacher, Mrs. Edwards. When asked to describe her new classroom environment, Medina shared the following:

I know our class talks a lot, but I try to be a good student, especially in mathematics. I will never forget when Mrs. Edwards and the principal talked about how bad our class is. The principal said, '4th hour is the bad class'. And Mrs. Edwards said, 'Yes they are'! I must keep my eyes on them at all times because I never know what they will do... When she said that, I just thought she doesn't notice me being good and we are not *all* bad.

Medina was frustrated when Mrs. Edwards agreed that the 4th hour students were bad, unpredictable, and in need of constant supervision. The comments Medina heard from Mrs. Edwards have been associated with a lack of teacher trust in teacher education literature. Specifically, Mrs. Edwards' characterization of her students did not demonstrate confidence in Medina's *mathematics identity* (Martin, 2000), including Medina's belief that she tries to be a "good" mathematics student. According to Martin (2000), mathematics identity refers to the beliefs that individuals develop about their ability to perform or participate in a mathematical context and use mathematics to change their lives. A mathematics identity involves a person's understanding of who they are as a knower and doer of mathematics. Medina's reflection offers

a point of departure for examining the importance of trusting student-teacher relationships in urban mathematics classrooms.

First, we review research noting the importance of trust in student teacher relationships broadly, and in urban mathematics classrooms specifically. After we summarize our methodology we present data that illuminate the teacher behaviors students identified as demonstrations of distrust, the ways in which these demonstrations misaligned with students' mathematical identities, and students' perceptions of the effects of Mrs. Edwards' distrust on their mathematics learning. In this paper, we examine the effects of Mrs. Edward's perceived lack of trust in her students on the mathematics learning experiences of Medina and her peers.

Previous research on middle school student teacher relationships shows that these relationships influence a variety of student outcomes, such as students' academic achievement (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Parsley & Corcoran, 2003). Research has also shown relationships between students and teachers affect students' experiences and learning in mathematics classrooms (e.g., Batty, 2013; Howard, 2001). In fact, Batty (2013) argued that the relationships that teachers build with students are just as important as the quality of the mathematics that is taught. Student teacher relationships are important and we have limited understanding of these relationships at the middle school level, especially from the perspectives of African American students. There are few studies, however, that have focused on the role of such interpersonal relationships in mathematics education (Batty, 2013), and even fewer studies that have considered this issue from the perspective of African American students.

Research indicates that students in urban contexts note the benefits of the presence of a caring, trustworthy adult in school (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). Little is known about how students experience positive student teacher relationships or develop trust in mathematics classrooms as it relates to inconsistent teacher presence. Increased attention

to students' experiences can offer insight into their perspectives and might shed light on the affective and interpersonal variables that shape student teacher relationships, and ultimately students' mathematics learning. An emphasis should be placed on developing trusting relationships between students and teachers in mathematics classrooms.

Literature Review

Researchers have examined how trust is experienced within student teacher relationships from both students' and teachers' perspective (Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Raider-Roth, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Trust is essential for building healthy relationships in schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2003), and for students' success in the classroom (Adam & Forsyth, 2013). Despite the recognized importance of student teacher trust, we know little about the nature and function of trust in mathematics classrooms. This section examines research relevant to trusting relationships between teachers and their students. We define trust, discuss the importance of a trusting student teacher relationship, and trust in urban classrooms.

(Dis)trust Defined

Tschannen and Hoy (2000) stated, "Trust has been difficult to define because it is a complex concept. It seems by now well established that trust is multi-attributed and may have different bases and degrees depending on the context of the trust relationship" (p. 551). Trust has been described as people's willingness to be vulnerable due to their confidence that the individual(s) they interact with are open, benevolent, reliable and honest (Owens & Johnson, 2009; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) unpacked their definition of trust; they noted trusting relationships are open when people are willing to share information that makes them vulnerable. Benevolence means that a person will act in someone's best interest. Reliability means that relationships become stronger if the individuals do not have to worry whether their needs will be met. Individuals who work with honest

people can believe what they are told is accurate. The aforementioned characteristics are components of a trusting relationship. In this paper, trust will be defined in context of interpersonal relationships, using characteristics, described by Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2000), that make up a trusting relationship between a mathematics teacher and her students. A key objective is to better understand how students discuss the need for a trusting relationship with their teacher. While this study does not address all relational elements of the school environment, it does focus on trust between students and teachers, and its connection to students' experiences in their mathematics classroom.

When there is a lack of trust in a relationship, one may find a level of distrust. Baier (1994) noted that intimidation may take place when a trusting relationship was never developed or trust was broken. Ennis & McCauley (2002) stated individuals who have to work in an environment where mutual trust does not exist may experience unequal power dynamics where one of the individuals involved may feel like they are being controlled. A distrusting relationship may lead to negative interactions between those involved in the relationship. For this paper, distrust is defined in terms of the lack of interpersonal relationships between students and their teacher.

Trust and student achievement in urban mathematics classrooms

Broadly, trusting student teacher relationships are understood as a precursor to student achievement in urban settings, particularly with students of color (Brown, 2004; Harvey, 2013). Trust is also a highly contextual phenomenon, and might be understood or enacted differently in different contexts. For example, Kipnis (1996) noted that greater diversity can make developing trust more difficult due to the tendency that people may extend trust to people they perceive as similar to themselves. Because trust is developed over time, it may be more difficult to develop trust in a classroom that experiences teacher turnover. The transient nature

of a teacher's presence makes the formation of trust hard to foster, as trust requires knowledge and experience with a person over a period of time. The development of trust may require a commitment to vulnerability with one another.

Studies on student teacher relationships in urban contexts point to the importance of trust for academic achievement (Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Geist & Hoy, 2004; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Trust is an essential element of supporting students to take the types of risks necessary to engage in mathematics learning. As Black students learn mathematics there are stressors that often stem from societal stereotypes about Black students' performance in mathematics (McGee & Martin, 2011). Students in distrusting relationships may have difficulty initiating and reciprocating trust in the classroom (Ennis & McCauley, 2002, p. 151).

Drawing on a large-scale, quantitative survey examining the impact of trust in a teacher on students' mathematics self-efficacy of 230 high school math students, Harvey (2013) argued, students' trust in their [math] teacher impacts both the way students interpret messages from teachers and their sense of confidence in the fairness of the teacher. Together, these factors can alter students' beliefs in their ability to be successful in a teacher's class. (p. 2)

When students have a trusting relationship with their teacher they may be willing to take academic risks in the classroom. Harvey (2013) goes on to state that students' trust in their mathematics teacher can lead to better relationships and increased competence in mathematics, and thus higher achievement. Despite these important findings, the literature offers little toward helping to conceptualize (dis)trust from urban mathematics students' perspectives. This qualitative study offers in-depth insight into the language students use to describe trusting student teacher relationships, the types of behaviors that they associate with trust, and the role they understand trust to play in students' experiences in their mathematics classroom.

Research Question

This article addresses the ways students describe their experiences in their mathematics classroom. The specific question we address is:

- 1) What did Black students in an urban middle school describe as salient to their experiences in their mathematics classroom when their teacher left during the school year?

Methods

This study was conducted in a 7th grade Pre-Algebra classroom at Westside Middle and High School in an urban community in the Midwest. The school enrolls approximately 1700 students per year. In 2013, the student body consisted of 95% predominately Black and Latina/o students with approximately 88% of the students receive free or reduced priced lunch. This study focused on the perspectives of five Black middle school students (Medina, Jade, Opal, Ty and Curtis). Students experienced two mathematics teachers during one academic school year. Mrs. Brown was their first mathematics teacher and Mrs. Edwards became their mathematics teacher in November.

Data collection and analysis

To examine Black students' perspectives on their experiences in a mathematics classroom, students wrote journals and participated in individual interviews with the first author. The students shared their perspectives by recounting daily and weekly experiences in their mathematics class after their first teacher left during the academic school year. The journals allowed students to share experiences as they happened, even though they may have connected current experiences to past experiences with their previous mathematics teacher.

As suggested by Barone (2011), the data sources for this study include interviews, written journals, classroom observations, and field notes. The primary data sources included

written journals and student interviews. The secondary data sources included field notes from classroom observations during classroom sessions. The information gathered from the primary and secondary data sources informed the semi structured student interviews. The first author carried out the initial thematic analysis (Lempke, 1990). The first author coded students' responses in relationship to students' descriptions of trust. When coding for instances of trust, the first author was led to moments that students identified as distrust. In many of the instances the students explicitly stated their teacher did not trust them. After perusing students' descriptions of trust and distrust, we noticed connections between students' mathematics identities and their relationship with their teacher. We read the students' reflections on their relationship with Mrs. Edwards as a desire for her to honor their developing mathematical identities. To establish validity the first author conducted member checks to ensure students' experiences were portrayed in a manner that cohered with their perspectives, used multiple data collection methods and peer reviewed the themes with the second author that emerged from the data. Author 1 then invited Author 2 to serve as a secondary coder for the study. Author 2 was provided access to the transcripts and initial coding, and over four months reviewed and critiqued the initial codes developed by Author 1. All discrepancies were noted and discussed until both authors reached consensus.

Findings

In this section, we examine student-identified demonstrations of distrust (Id-Deen & Woodson, forthcoming), or, moments that the students submitted as evidence that Mrs. Edwards did not trust them. Our discussion is framed by the theme: demonstrations of distrust during mathematics learning, which highlights how the expressions of teacher distrust identified by the students contrasted with the students' sense of their own mathematical identities. Throughout

our paper, we also reference literature on urban mathematics education to suggest how demonstrations of distrust might serve to undermine their mathematics achievement.

Demonstrations of distrust during mathematics learning

Overall, the students believed that Mrs. Edwards did not trust them as mathematics learners. To support this belief, Curtis noted that Mrs. Edwards did not allow opportunities for the students to communicate with one another in class. He perceived that this was because Mrs. Edwards did not trust that student talk was task related:

“I’m not just talking, I am doing the assignment you gave us...Like, when she sees us talking, and immediately says, ‘stop talking’, she doesn’t even think we are talking about math. We are talking about math, but she always thinks we aren’t.”

At times during classroom observation, there were moments when Mrs. Edwards repeatedly asked students to stop talking when students worked on an assignment. As a result, Mrs. Edwards did not allow space for the types of productive, on task talk that supports cooperative mathematics learning (see Esmonde, 2009; Wood & Kalinic, 2012). Talking about the mathematics learning that occurs in the classroom helps students understanding of mathematics (Hufferd-Ackles, Fuson, & Sherin, 2004). This lack of trust also contrasted with Curtis’ understanding of himself as a focused mathematics learner.

Medina believed that Mrs. Edwards did not trust them as mathematics learners because she did not provide them with rigorous, engaging opportunities to develop their mathematical knowledge. She theorized, “She doesn’t trust that we will understand the math, so she always gives us worksheets. They are easy and I know I can do harder work”. During classroom observations, Author 1 noted students worked on worksheets an average of four times per week. Mrs. Edwards’ reliance on worksheets communicated low expectations to Medina about her ability to develop or demonstrate her mathematical knowledge. Low teacher expectations

undermine student achievement across content areas (Ladson-Billings, 2000), and in urban mathematics classrooms specifically (Haberman, 1991). In Medina's opinion, the low expectations demonstrated by Mrs. Edwards and the worksheets represented a lack of trust in student ability, and constrained opportunities for Medina to explore her mathematical identity as a mathematics learner capable of completing "harder work."

Similar to Medina, Ty felt that engaging mathematics curriculum was a feature of positive classroom cultures and student teacher relationships. He stated,

Math class is boring, so students don't want to be in there. Also, a lot of the students know she doesn't trust us, so we just do what we want because she won't trust us.

Ty found Mrs. Edwards' math classroom to be uninteresting and uninviting. When read with Medina's comment that the work in Mrs. Edwards' class was "easy," Ty's reflection suggests that Mrs. Edwards' low trust in her 4th hour students' mathematical ability created a space in which students became bored and disengaged. In a study of urban mathematics learner identities, Rubin (2007) suggested that experiences with boredom and disengagement in secondary mathematics classrooms may negatively affect students' mathematics identity & performance, as students might project this sense of disconnect to mathematics teaching and learning in other settings. Ty also noted that when he and his classmates determined that Mrs. Edwards did not trust them, they stopped trying to earn her trust.

Conclusion

We read the students' reflections on their relationship with Mrs. Edwards as a desire for her to honor their developing mathematical identities. The students understood themselves as focused on, capable of, and interested in high quality mathematics instruction. This contrasted with the ways in which Mrs. Edwards spoke about the students, the curriculum she offered, and the role she played in establishing a classroom culture. Data indicated that the mismatch between the

students' identification as mathematics learners and Mrs. Edwards' assessment of the students produced feelings of frustration, confusion, and disengagement. In Ty's opinion, continued demonstrations of teacher distrust resulted in a classroom space in which students just do what they want. As researchers, this seemed to suggest a problematic cycle in which demonstrations of distrust lead to student misbehavior, and student misbehavior validates further expressions of distrust.

The students wanted Mrs. Edwards to provide opportunities for them to meet high expectations, such as the opportunity to participate in on task dialogue, the opportunity for more rigorous mathematics assignments, and the opportunity to experience the mathematics classroom as an interesting, engaging space. To facilitate these types of opportunities, Mrs. Edwards would need to demonstrate trust by making herself vulnerable as an educator. If she makes opportunities for on task dialogue, students could misuse this space. If she provides more rigorous assignments, students could fail. If she invests in creative strategies, students may still choose not to engage. These are important risks to consider, especially given her principal's perception that she was teaching the "bad" class. Mrs. Edwards might face ridicule from colleagues and administrators if she demonstrates trust, and her "bad" students don't reciprocate. This suggests another problematic cycle. When school leaders disseminate narratives of untrustworthy, uncontrollable or "bad" students, teachers might be hesitant to disrupt these narratives. If Mrs. Edwards trusts her students and they don't meet her high expectations, she might appear incompetent.

In the context of high stakes testing, inflexible standards, and eroding professional unions, trusting students is admittedly risky work. It is no riskier than the types of work that countless students of color in urban schools engage in every day. Many of these students do not have much choice in how vulnerable they are in student teacher relationships, as they

are forced to rely on schools for information, safety and the types of credentials that allow them to envision a meaningful future (Carey, 2015). Educators can acknowledge these vulnerabilities, and work to honor students' developing mathematical identities, in simple, meaningful ways.

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