

Trust in Teachers as a Mediator Between School Climate and School Belonging

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the Introduction, paragraph 1, the claim that school belonging is “profoundly shaped by the quality of social interactions within the school context” should be more tightly linked to the constructs of trust and climate, to establish the groundwork for the proposed mediation model.

In paragraph 5, the study’s justification is well-developed, but the authors could enhance it by referencing specific gaps in the South African context (e.g., historical mistrust in institutions) beyond “educational inequality, racial integration, and socio-economic disparity.”

In the Methods and Materials, paragraph 1, the authors mention stratified random sampling but do not describe the strata used. Clarifying whether these were based on geographic, linguistic, or socio-economic factors would increase methodological transparency.

The paragraph preceding Table 1 claims “limited variability in students’ responses,” based on standard deviations, but no measures of skewness or kurtosis are reported here. It would be helpful to present these values alongside the descriptive statistics to support this claim.

In the SEM model fit discussion (paragraph before Table 3), the authors report indices such as CFI and RMSEA but do not report the SRMR value, which is also a standard indicator of model fit. Including this would strengthen the statistical reporting.

In paragraph 4 of the Discussion, while citing Demir (2015), the authors suggest a causal link between organizational trust and teacher leadership. However, this inference may be overstated given the correlational design. The language should be moderated accordingly.

Authors uploaded the revised manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In paragraph 2 of the Introduction, while citing Canlı and Demirtaş (2018), the term “recursive relationship between institutional trust and environmental conditions” is introduced but not clearly unpacked. A brief explanation of how this recursion operates would clarify the theoretical logic.

In paragraph 3 of the Introduction, the definition of trust in teachers is commendable; however, the article should explicitly distinguish between general interpersonal trust and relational trust, as defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002), which is central to this study.

In paragraph 4, the sentence “trust operates as a fundamental mechanism...” could be strengthened by incorporating relevant psychological theories (e.g., social capital theory or self-determination theory) to offer a theoretical lens on the mediating process.

In the Measures section under "School Climate," while the DSCS-S is introduced, the article does not specify which subscales were used in the SEM model. Reporting this is critical for replication and clarity.

In the Trust subsection, the authors state that the Trust in Schools Scale “has been validated in later adaptations,” but they do not provide information on cultural adaptation for South African students. Details on how the tool was adapted and validated locally would be essential.

In the Data Analysis section, the sentence “Mahalanobis distance values were examined to detect multivariate outliers...” would benefit from specifying how many cases were removed (if any), or confirming that all were retained.

The Findings, paragraph 1, provides thorough demographic data, but it would be scientifically stronger to report the socio-economic status or language background of the participants to better contextualize the findings within the South African education system.

In Table 4 and the related paragraph, the terms “b,” “SE,” and “Beta” are reported but not defined for readers unfamiliar with SEM conventions. It would be helpful to explain these briefly or include a footnote.

In the Discussion, the sentence “This interpretation is supported by Platz...” should be expanded to explain what specific relational dynamics were most influential in the trust-building process, as discussed by Platz (2021).

Authors uploaded the revised manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.