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Teija Koskela

Signs of trust – Parent's vulnerability and trust when collaborating with their child's teacher

Zeichen des Vertrauens – Verletzlichkeit und Vertrauen der Eltern bei der Zusammenarbeit mit den Lehrkräften ihrer Kinder

This research focuses on parental experiences of trustful collaboration with teachers and school personnel in Finnish schools when they have children needing support. According to previous research, the relationship between schools and parents when a child needs support is usually seen as a subject of continuous negotiation. Parents often have limited influence, while experts, such as teachers, leverage their authority and status in decision-making processes related to supporting children. The parent's position seems to be questioned; as such, their position as an influential authority is vulnerable. Based on interview data, this study qualitatively examines how parents experience trust, or the lack thereof, towards their child's teachers. The phenomenographic result, "outcome space", with three categories, is introduced: experiences of strong trust, experiences of concern about loss of trust and experiences of broken trust. The discussion deals with the importance of the outcome space in understanding the meaning of trust in order to improve maintaining trust.

Keywords: parents, collaboration, vulnerability, trust, Finland

Der Fokus der vorliegenden Studie liegt auf den Erfahrungen von Eltern, die in finnischen Schulen mit vertrauensvoller Zusammenarbeit mit Lehrkräften und Schulpersonal konfrontiert sind, insbesondere in Fällen, in denen ihre Kinder Unterstützung benötigen. Gemäß früheren Untersuchungen wird die Beziehung zwischen Schule und Eltern, sofern ein Kind Unterstützung benötigt, in der Regel als Gegenstand kontinuierlicher Verhandlungen betrachtet. Eltern haben oft nur begrenzten Einfluss, während Fachleute wie Lehrkräfte ihre Autorität und ihren Status in Entscheidungsprozessen zur Unterstützung von Kindern nutzen. Die Position der Eltern scheint in Frage gestellt zu sein, sodass ihre Position als einflussreiche Autorität gefährdet ist. Auf der Grundlage von Interviewdaten analysiert diese Studie in qualitativer Weise, wie Eltern Vertrauen oder Misstrauen gegenüber den Lehrkräften ihrer Kinder empfinden. Das phänomenografische Resultat, der sogenannte "Outcome Space" (Ergebnisraum), wird anhand dreier Kategorien präsentiert: Erfahrungen starken Vertrauens, Erfahrungen der Sorge um Vertrauensverlust und Erfahrungen von Vertrauensbruch. In der Diskussion werden die Ergebnisse aus der Perspektive der Bedeutung von Vertrauen und der Aufrechterhaltung von Vertrauen betrachtet.

Schlüsselwörter: Eltern, Zusammenarbeit, Verletzlichkeit, Vertrauen, Finnland

1 Introduction

This study focuses on trust and vulnerability in negotiations between parents and school personnel on issues related to child support. Indeed, trust is an important factor in home–school collaboration (Shayo et al., 2021). In educational research, trust issues are receiving increasing attention (Bormann et al., 2021b). There is a need to develop research-based knowledge of trust in more complex processes, such as home–school collaboration over long periods of time and involving changes in actors, in their interests and fields of expertise, and in their personal and institutional perspectives, from the viewpoint of parents and their experiences (Bormann et al., 2021a, b).

Trust has local, country-specific dimensions (Bachmann, 2018; Niedlich, 2021; Välimaa, 2021). Finnish society, particularly its educational system, is based on trust (Pollari et al., 2018; Välimaa, 2021). Teachers in Finland are trusted, their profession is highly valued by the public (*ibid.*), and the Finnish educational system is considered relatively well-functioning and successful (Pitkänen, 2023; Savolainen, 2023). Nevertheless, maintaining a continuous, fruitful discussion between home and school remains challenging, despite children’s support being enshrined in normative texts like the National Core Curriculum (FNBE, 2016). Collaborative approaches are recognised as important in teacher education (Mouroutsou & Koskela, 2024). However, teacher education does not adequately prepare educators for classrooms with diverse student needs (Savolainen, 2023) or for multiprofessional collaboration with parents concerning support (Melasalmi et al., 2023).

Teachers play a crucial role in collaboration with parents. Teachers can choose to open dialogue and give parents an active role, or they can hinder parents’ attempts to contribute to discussions about their child’s support and resist collaboration (Mann & Gilmore, 2023; Rautamies et al., 2019). By focusing discussions on the school level and adopting a strong expert authority approach (Gershwin, 2020; Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010), the school and its personnel can place parents in a vulnerable position. Excluding parents from support planning and decision processes leads to feelings of powerlessness and exclusion (Hein, 2017).

In this regard, the position of parents can be seen as vulnerable. According to Hamm et al. (2024), vulnerability is a situational phenomenon that can be perceived very differently by people. Nevertheless, with regard to the interaction between parents and teachers, some fundamental aspects can be identified that may cause parents to experience themselves as potentially vulnerable. Although legislation and norms grant parents collaboration rights, especially when support is needed, these rights often require legitimisation in daily school activities (Burke, 2013; Gershwin, 2020; Mortier, 2020; Tveit, 2009). Responsibilities for parents and teachers thus remain to be negotiated (Böök & Perälä-Littunen, 2015) as parents seek to balance power and contribute to the planning process (Cologon, 2022; Mortier, 2020; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011; Tveit, 2018). However, parents report being excluded from collaboration processes: they often receive information too late to contribute effectively, hindering their possibilities for collaboration (Tucker & Schwarz, 2013; Tveit, 2009). Parents’ daily lives are unique; this reality must be recognised when planning support for their child (Tucker & Schwarz 2013).

Conclusively, parents can face varying circumstances when negotiating their child's support with its teachers. Against this background, this study aims to outline parental perceptions of how trust manifests in teachers' and school practices, particularly in situations where parents negotiate support, representing their child's interests.

2 Trust

According to a sociological perspective, trust is connected to relations and involves interaction (e. g., Giddens, 2008; Lewis & Weigert, 2012), uncertainties and risks, as well as expectations regarding relations (Möllering, 2001). Trust is viewed as either a prerequisite (Fukuyama, 1996) or a product (Putnam, 2000) of social capital; also, it has been described as a process (Möllering, 2001) as well as a resource (Bormann & Thies, 2019). It is connected with risk-taking and reducing uncertainty and vulnerability (Hamm et al., 2024; Lewis & Weigert, 2012; Misztal, 2011). From this perspective, trust can absorb uncertainty (Bormann & John, 2014) or serve as a strategic decision to mitigate it (Frederiksen, 2014).

Trust differs based on the relationship between the trustor and trustee and is differentiated into institutional, organisational and interpersonal trust. Institutional trust focuses on broader social systems, such as organisations (Bachmann, 2018). Institutions are expected to have explicit, controlled norms that should be transparent (Niedlich et al., 2021). *Institutional trust* requires a shared understanding of the institution's leading ideas (Lepsius, 2017). If institutional trust fails, significant individual efforts are needed to build the trust required for effective cooperation (Bachmann, 2018).

Regarding *organisational trust*, individual representatives of institutions create and reproduce trust within those institutions (ibid.). This representation of an organisation's trustworthiness is known as facework (Giddens, 1990; Kroeger, 2011). *Interpersonal trust*, on the other hand, involves recognising mutual intersubjective relations (Frederiksen, 2014; Misztal, 2011). If an organisation's social control is ineffective, trust in institutions may be replaced by trust in individuals, where personal values and motives can override institutional values (Lepsius, 2017).

Trust involves a positive expectation that the trustee will recognise the vulnerability of the trustor and will not harm him/her (Bachmann, 2018; Bormann et al., 2021b). Since trust is defined by the trustor's decision to be vulnerable, it includes an awareness of potential risk and uncertainty regarding the actual trustworthiness of the trustee (Bachmann, 2018; Bormann & John, 2014; Misztal, 2011). Vulnerability can also refer to individuals' lack of capacity to protect themselves and, thus, to their identification as needing special care. As such, the term can be labelling and patronising (Brown, 2011). Using vulnerability as a concept can highlight "either the individual or the structural reasons for disadvantage or need" (ibid., p. 318). It is important to avoid the conceptual limitations of 'vulnerability' and its flexible, sometimes purposeful, use (Brown, 2011), as well as its connection to personal values (Madsen Theilmann, 2023). Potential risks of harm should be distinguished from perceived, relational and contemporaneous experiences of harm (Hamm et al., 2024). Interestingly, even when trust exists in a relationship, distrust can still protect against disappointments (Lepsius, 2017) and can cause cautious, restrained behavior. This notion suggests that trust can comprise different components, some of which may exist even if others

are absent—meaning the amount or strength of trust can vary. In general, when trust is weak, collaboration is difficult; coercion and forced cooperation require significant effort and may not yield successful results (Fukuyama, 1996).

3 Trust in the parent-teacher collaboration

With trust seen as an indispensable factor in home-school collaboration (Rusnak, 2018), teachers are expected to manage their interaction professionally (Bormann et al., 2021a). Parents' belief in a teacher's competence and chosen pedagogical practices represent a valuing of that competence; it is linked to their experienced trust towards teachers (Lerkkanen et al., 2013). Teachers' position as professionals emphasises their responsibility to understand that for many parents, information about supporting a child may be new and following information can be challenging.

For trust to occur, family-professional relationships require a sense of belonging and membership in the school culture (Francis et al., 2016; Levinthal, 2022). Interpersonal trust at schools is understood through five facets: benevolence, reliability, competence, openness, and honesty (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). This concept expands to include the facets of trustworthiness (Bormann et al., 2021a; Shayo et al., 2021). Trust in schools encompasses all actors in the school community and their mutual relationships: institutions, personnel, external support systems, parents, and children (Lazarová & Pol, 2021; Niedlich et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of the local organisational context.

If schools and teachers are aware of and engage with local family communities, they are better positioned to formulate shared goals and support children and young people with their challenges (Payne & Zeichner, 2017). This approach broadens the concept of vulnerability to include relationships between people and their ability to actively maintain agency when collaborating with professionals in children's support networks.

The ability and willingness of support planning professionals to collaborate with parents and local communities can reduce challenges, allowing vulnerability to be acknowledged and accepted in dialogue. In this context, parents represent their children, who are, as well, seen as being in a vulnerable position as students. When researching parents' perceptions of their children, this kind of classification of their children is not always clear. Not all parents perceive their children with impairments as equally vulnerable; for example, a deaf child may be seen as more or less vulnerable, depending on the parents' perception (Sealy et al., 2023).

For parents, the teacher is the primary collaborator, meeting with their children every day. The teacher represents the school as both an institution and a community. Simultaneously, the teacher interprets the child's behaviour and needs, interacting with parents from a position of professionalism. This research focuses on parents' voices, describing their cooperation with school teachers in planning their child's support. The examination also explores instances where trust is lacking in these interactions. The guiding research question is: How do parents describe their perceptions and experiences of trust in collaboration with teachers concerning their child's support?

4 Context of the study

In Finnish society, trust allows local school authorities considerable freedom to modify support structures for pupils, provided they adhere to curriculum laws. Teachers are highly autonomous and responsible for following norms like the National Core Curriculum (FNBE, 2016). The support system includes collaborative support from multidisciplinary teams, and the support must be available to all students (*ibid.*; Väyrynen & Paksuniemi, 2020). No medical diagnosis of students is required; decisions on support levels can be based on pedagogical reasoning, and teachers are mainly responsible for determining students' need for support (Björn et al., 2016; FNBE, 2016). This underscores the responsibility of teachers to observe and recognise various support needs.

In the Finnish school context, parents are assumed to support their children's learning and participate in communication when invited (Karila & Alasuutari, 2012). Generally, the relation between parents and teachers is experienced as fluent (Levinthal, 2022). However, there are some challenges to parental participation. Parents often feel like laypersons when teachers emphasise their expertise (Böök & Perälä-Littunen, 2015). When teachers see their profession as a right to know better, they may view collaboration situations where parents disagree with their support interpretation as problematic, casting parents as opponents (Eklund et al., 2021). Home-school interaction in the case of a child with support needs is seen as a power game; in the worst case, the child is placed in the position of a victim, and teachers' abilities to provide support vary widely (Honkasilta et al., 2015; Hotulainen & Takala, 2014).

5 Data and method

This research used a qualitative approach by applying a phenomenographical approach to identify critical aspects of trust as phenomena using descriptions of perceptions or experiences as the units of analysis (Marton & Booth, 1997). This approach allows for analysing the participants' situational understandings without classifying them as individuals. The intention is to describe different ways of discerning certain phenomena while allowing individuals' conceptions to differ with the context (*ibid.*; Thorsten & Tväråna, 2024). In this study, each parent had multiple perceptions and experiences with various teachers and in diverse contexts during their child's school biography.

The interview data was originally collected for research describing parents' experiences of collaborating with schools in the process of planning support for their children. To obtain the sample, invitations to interviews were sent through parent organisations and peer networks. Willing participants were asked to contact the researcher. The choice to invite voluntary parents followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2023).

This research involves 11 interviews — 10 with mothers and one with a couple — who had experience collaborating in Finnish basic education concerning the support of at least one child with impairment. The participants represented both urban and rural regions and were from five provinces in Finland. Three interviews were conducted remotely due to long distances. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The mean value of the duration of the interview was 72 minutes.

The thematic interview protocol covered the beginning of the school years, how the need for support was recognised by the parents, what information was provided by the school, the meetings and interactions during support planning, the parents' opportunities to contribute, post-planning collaboration, practices used at the school, and the teachers' role in collaboration with parents. Parents were informed about the thematic structure of the interview before it took place. They could start with any theme and speak freely about their experienced collaboration in various contexts. They were asked to provide examples and clarifications during the interview. Although parents were not asked for their child's diagnosis, some parents revealed specific details about their children.

The aim of the phenomenographic analysis is to identify the critical aspects of qualitatively different experiences and to iteratively develop a logical structure of tested categories, known in phenomenography as outcome space, based on similarities and differences across the interviews (Åkerlind, 2012; Marton & Booth, 1997). A phenomenographic analysis also includes the question: What are the qualitative differences that vary according to different categories of experience (Marton & Booth, 1997)? The analysis highlights the descriptions according to their aspects (Thorsten & Tväråna, 2024). This approach aimed to analyse second-order descriptions of the phenomena from the participants' viewpoints (Marton & Booth, 1997; Sin, 2010) rather than describing the phenomena themselves. That is to say, that qualitatively different ways of experiencing certain phenomena (Marton & Booth, 1997) can refer to structural differences of awareness expressed in interview situations. The parents' descriptions of experienced collaboration with professionals were layered, and our interest was not only in elements or aspects of experience but also in differences in that sense and how aspects, as layers, were related to each other (Gibbins et al., 2015; Uljens, 1989).

The analysis began by identifying descriptions of experiences related to trust and perceptions of the teacher's role in building or undermining trust, as informed by previous research. The unit of analysis was the description of the perception of the situation (Sin, 2010). The analysis was continued by categorising and matching quotations, resolving unclear categorisations and developing a logical structure for the categories by identifying critical aspects (Åkerlind, 2012; Marton & Booth, 1997).

6 Results

In general, the data show that the contexts, situations and processes of collaboration concerning support varied widely. The interviews described different parental needs and expectations at various stages of the child's educational journey. The child's need for support and the related collaboration with teachers were always contextualised by the parents. As context changed, parents' experiences of vulnerability, such as bringing up difficult issues during discussions, varied depending on the professionals involved.

Assuming that risk and uncertainty make people vulnerable and that vulnerability is a condition of trust, the unifying factor in all the material was the parents' concern for an effective continuum of support and for their child to feel accepted as a member of the school community. Their awareness of their right to receive support was the foundation of home-school collaboration, but uncertainty about the quality and continuity of the implemented support was also a concern.

The situational nature of parental trust was apparent, as was the position of the current teacher, which was crucial. Parents compared their experiences with each teacher, particularly focusing on how teachers collaborated with their children's networks.

“It is very strongly dependent on the teacher and how the teacher wants to handle things. I now have the experience of a teacher who didn't want to and a teacher who wanted to collaborate. If the teacher has enough state of will to act in the best interest of the child and listens to the parents, then the collaboration will work.”

In that sense, teachers represented the facework of the school as an institution that is supposed to offer the best care and support for any respective child. The quotation suggests that the parent must adapt to the current situation, and if the teacher is not willing to collaborate, there is little the parent can do. This makes the parents' position vulnerable, which is why trust is so important. However, the analysis also underlines that parents experience trust very differently: as strong trust, as a concern for a loss of trust or as a broken trust.

6.1 Experiences of strong trust

All interviewed parents had experienced quality collaboration in planning support for their child. The fulfilment of expectations was emphasised in the interviews in which strong trust is reported, particularly in listening to the child and parents, keeping promises, and following rules. Facets of trustworthiness, such as benevolence and openness, were crucial for strong trust. Benevolence was interpreted in descriptions indicating that the teacher was willing to learn new methods or practices, experiment, and modify their actions according to the child's needs. Also, parents appreciated the opportunity to talk openly with the teacher. They evaluated the approachability and availability of each new teacher as important. Parents mentioned the teacher's positive attitude and the effective flow of information as significant for them to trust the teacher. Particularly, these two facets were highlighted when the collaboration with the new teacher began. As a relevant expectation of teachers' professionalism, parents assumed they were competent and wanted to help every child to progress.

“She can read people so well. We had such a lovely teacher. The trust was from the beginning there.”

“When I see that the teacher takes the child seriously, listens to the child and is interested in the child, and when the teacher's questions, which he points to me, concern the child, the child's skills and enjoyment and his well-being, my trust has been bought.”

Teachers' willingness and ability to collaborate within networks and organise collaboration were important parts of building strong trust. Effective collaboration involved timely information, quick responses to changes in the child's situation, and a readiness to listen to parents' interpretations and suggestions.

In successful collaboration, parents often used the expression, “teacher knows my child well.” “Knowing child” had diverse meanings. It referred to recognising the child's vulnerabilities and needs for support but also their strengths in the school context. A teacher's awareness of

the child's personal interests, hobbies, and life outside of school signified a strong relationship with both the child and the parents.

Parents appreciated the opportunity to anticipate processes, thereby reducing uncertainty. The continuity of routines helped parents find and create space for their own participation in decision-making. Collaboration concerning support for the child should be continuous, and all parents had, at some point, experienced phases of effective continuity in collaboration. To reduce uncertainty and allow vulnerability, parents and teachers have developed interactive methods to handle possible disagreements.

“I look (IEP) and if I disagree, we have been able to write down my thoughts in the meeting as well. We write in collaboration. The teacher knows the child really well after so many years. That IEP looks just like our son. I haven't had anything to fix.”

As a sign of strong trust, the responsibility for differentiating the learning process, materials and providing individual instructions was given to the teacher. Learning support planning processes require, in addition to teachers, the involvement of, for example, a doctor, a psychologist, a therapist, or a school social worker. Clear communication from teachers about meetings and practices, along with smooth collaboration between professionals, increased transparency and encouraged parental involvement.

6.2 Experienced concern about loss of trust

All parents also experienced phases of worrying about trust in their collaboration with teachers. Unresolved and accumulating ambiguities, disappointments, and disagreements are recognised as threats to trust. The parents came to view the school and teaching as imperfect because they experienced feelings of sadness or potential harms or threats, or they anticipated possible future issues that could not be openly shared or thoroughly discussed with teachers. Although open conflicts were not reported, a continuous flow of negative messages challenged parents to trust. In particular, when negative messages were sent through the electronic application (WILMA), it could easily be misunderstood and damage trust. In addition, parents were concerned about the content of the messages stored in the electronic system and how it might affect their child's future.

“I am critical of the WILMA application. I feel like it's a one-size-fits-all criminal record. The channel of negative feedback.”

When parents reported being concerned about a loss of trust to teachers, they also described the dilemma that teachers wanted the parents to induce their children to behave better at school. Parents, however, felt it was difficult to influence specific situations at school based on fragile and contradictory information from the teacher and their child. In addition, parents were asked to participate in several teacher-parent meetings that repeated the same issues, focusing on the children's bad behaviour without any signs of pedagogical solutions. The parents' professional expectations of the teacher's professionalism were not met.

“They, first and second grade, were really terrible. There was an elderly teacher, who didn't know how to deal with these kids. They were completely recklessly and they treated the teacher however they wanted.”

Parents experienced that the teacher could not organise meaningful school days for their children but have few opportunities to affect the situation. These kinds of experiences emphasise parental confusion and vulnerability. However, collaboration continued, as did the parents' feelings of concern about a loss of trust.

Parents felt conflicted, especially in situations where they had offered their support to the school, but it was not considered. For example, parents volunteered to be supervisors so that children could participate in educational activities outside of school, but their help was not accepted, and the children were not allowed to participate. In another instance, parents organised for a specialist teacher with a specific disability specialisation to visit the school and inform teachers about pedagogical solutions, but the class teacher or school did not agree to organise a joint meeting.

Even when parents had a good and trusting relationship with the teacher, rigid administrative decision-making processes could still threaten their trust in the school as an institution. Parents were concerned about issues such as the level of support services, the turnover of teachers and assistants, or the availability of learning materials for children with support needs. When there was a new teacher every year, the continuity of support was a particular concern.

“I would like the teacher to be in touch at the stage when a picture of the situation is formed and written. That you don't trust that the previous year's teacher has made a good IEP. That if there was such trust in joint work, that both are on the same page.”

The research also indicated that parents could not always expect competent compliance with the norms governing the school. Some schools or teachers required a diagnosis before providing any support for the child, although this is not mandatory.

“But at this school you don't get help until there is a diagnosis. Before you have the paper in hand that your child has something. The support only started after the diagnosis.”

Signs of concern about loss of trust were that parents' interpretations of their children's needs for support did not match the practices experienced at school. According to parents' experiences, some teachers did not organise yearly meetings to update individual learning plans. Parents reported needing very basic support processes that should have been obvious. Parents explained situations to themselves by acknowledging the teacher's duty to work in demanding conditions with many children, and they wanted to be tolerant. They felt that the institutional aims of support were not fully implemented, but they understood the reasons and explanations for the situation. Some situations were handled by parents with humour. In addition, parents reported dissatisfaction, frustration, and teachers' and the school's reluctance to make the desired changes. Despite the vulnerabilities, a sufficient amount of trust was maintained, and the concern about loss of trust had not led to open conflict.

6.3 Broken trust as an extreme experience

Experiences of harm, disrespect, and hurt were found only in three interviews with parents. These experiences represent significant vulnerability and open conflict. Situations where parents' belief in the fundamental expectations of the education system began to waver were

pivotal in the breakdown of their trust. In such situations, parents used phrases like “fight for my child” or “defend our family”. Such an interpretation took a long time and required several disappointments and attempts to resolve conflicts. When parents were repeatedly told that teachers could not work with their child at school, and their views on the child’s guidance were continually ignored, the only option was to change the environment.

“Until then, I had thought that teachers are education professionals and know a lot about it. I have trusted their knowledge of their field. However, over the years it has become clear that they don't think about how it would be good for my child to be in school and how he would do better.”

When deep confusion in such situations was critical for the experience of broken trust. Vulnerable situations were often marked by unpleasant surprises, as outlined in the following quotation:

“It was quite confusing for me, and it was also scary, and I found it quite threatening that there were so many prosecutors on behalf of the school accusing, and there was such a situation that now I am here to defend our family.”

In this situation, the parent maintained her ability to act and refused to speak in an unbalanced setting. She demanded more information before continuing with the process. However, suspension and a leap of faith, driven by hope, encouraged her ability to act. In situations like this, parents felt it was important to ensure that their opinions and opposing comments were included in the planning documents. To achieve this, she had to engage in open conflict.

Broken trust particularly emerged in situations where parents could no longer make assumptions about what to expect and felt they had no way to communicate with the school about their child’s needs and the school’s actions. Parents’ descriptions of their messages being continuously ignored turned into feelings of total powerlessness. Their reasonable expectations were repeatedly shattered. At that point, parents described having no more opportunities to communicate their messages to the school.

At the final stage of the trusting relationship, there were examples of deep and continuous mistrust. The cycle of disappointments, ignored discussions, and parents’ perceptions of a complete lack of benevolence was never broken, leading to a chain of vulnerable experiences that ultimately turned expectations negative. There were no longer any good reasons to trust. As a last resort, the parent made an administrative appeal but found it to be a slow, years-long process.

“My daughter has been turned into a pawn. A pawn for the board of the adult power game. And the only one who suffers is she. Nothing will change unless someone says there is an elephant in the room.”

Situationality and relationality were highlighted in parents' discussions. In some cases, this might provide an opportunity to resolve even deep distrust through open conflict. When there were no more signs of trust in a particular situation, changing the teacher was key to the child’s learning. With a new teacher, there was another chance to rebuild trust.

“Right at the beginning of the third grade, he got almost full marks on the math test and has since passed all the tests - and before that he didn't agree to take any tests. What has happened - I don't know. The teacher changed. Of course, the child is older.”

Signs of broken trust are connected with unsolved contradictions and open conflicts between parents and school personnel. Regarding this interview material, the broken interpersonal trust could not be repaired in the relationship between the same persons. In a situation of open conflict, it was only possible to maintain institutional trust in the school in those situations where the child's teacher changed.

6.4 Critical aspects of parents' experiences of trust

According to the phenomenographic differentiation of categories, critical aspects of parents' experiences of trust included first, their interpretation of benevolence as understanding their child's benefit; second, their experienced vulnerability; and third, their interpretation of professional collaboration with teachers and schools.

Experiencing benevolence by accepting a child with its needs seemed to be the focus of parent-teacher negotiations. When parents and teachers had a shared understanding of what really benefits the child, their negotiations and interactions were fluent. This was an essential aspect of trust. In the opposite situation, a conflicting understanding of the existence or nature of the child's need for support made it difficult to negotiate solutions for support, and parents' trust in teachers was damaged.

The interview excerpts included descriptions of vulnerability. The parents described their interactions and relations, as well as their interpretations of their experienced wide-ranging feelings, from fear to happiness. The descriptions draw a spectrum of tolerance of caused harm and experienced vulnerability. At the extreme end, the parents' interpretations of their child's rights as having been ignored or their perceived disrespect in their conversations with teachers broke not only their relationship of trust but also their interaction. Correspondingly, their willingness to be vulnerable in front of teachers as representatives of schools as institutions was clear when they described situations in which they shared with teachers their problems and worries concerning their children.

Parents' interpretations of teachers' professional interaction, responsibility for the continuum and rules of collaboration, and school personnel's ability to promote this aspect were discovered as important. Experiences of perceived strong trust were described in terms of teachers' approachability, benevolence and openness. On the other hand, when trust was described as weak, the collaboration was inflexible. Teachers were difficult to reach, communication was distant, and electronic tools were used in a way that the parents found difficult to understand. Especially, the ability of schools and teachers to work through contradictions and develop practices for solving them enhanced trust. Furthermore, the teacher's and the school's way of implementing their knowledge of the norms guiding the child's support was important.

7 Discussion

This study focuses on parental experiences of trust towards school professionals concerning the necessary support for their children. In this study, vulnerability is viewed both as a

politically determined affiliation with certain groups (e. g., UN, 2023) and as the management of uncertainty (Frederiksen, 2014; Misztal, 2011), experiencing powerlessness (e. g., Hein, 2017) or an unclear balance of power and rights (Cologon, 2022; Mortier, 2020; Ruppert & Gaffney, 2011; Tveit, 2018). Previous research highlights the challenges and barriers parents face when participating in support planning. Parents with children who need support can be considered as particularly vulnerable. They depend on the teacher's professionalism and their will to support their child as best as possible and to involve and collaborate with the parents. At the same time, they cannot control or influence the teachers' actions.

The results show a wide spectrum of parental experiences of trust, including strong trust, concern about loss of trust and broken trust. Aligning with previous research (Rautamies et al., 2019), all parents experienced both good or excellent collaboration and poorly progressing collaboration when participating in negotiations about planning their children's support.

The parents described several different and sometimes inadequate practices. This raises questions about parental vulnerability and organisational and institutional trust, particularly regarding how expectations, norms, autonomy and control are enacted and interpreted in school practices (e. g., Möllering, 2013) and in teachers' facework (Giddens, 1990) within the school as an institution.

Parents acknowledged the incompleteness of planning processes and support mechanisms and school routines in relation to legislation. They accepted the reality of limited opportunities for teachers and schools to implement support. This kind of lack of trust can, indeed, protect from deep disappointments (Lepsius, 2017). Conversely, all actions planned together in the child's best interest were welcome and promoted parents' trust in teachers. The teacher's willingness to try new things and to suggest reasonable forms of support was interpreted as benevolence, and it contributed to improving the parents' interpersonal and organisational trust.

This study had limitations in its interpretations and conclusions. First, regarding the research setting, the study only covered the parents' point of view. Since trust is a relational phenomenon, future research should investigate parent-teacher dyads or a broader realm of support. In this case, the dynamics of the situation would not rely solely on self-reported interview data. Methodologically, it is important to grasp the phenomenon of trust by observing negotiation situations. Second, inviting voluntary parents can lead to bias. Thus, obviously only parents accepted the invitation to be interviewed whose resources and interests were sufficient. Maybe particularly such parents participated who were more active, concerned or willing to talk about their experiences with teachers than other parents.

Regarding trust and vulnerability, the quality of professionalism (Bormann, 2024; Bormann et al., 2021a) was emphasised during interactions in problematic situations. Pedagogical expertise and professional authority can be used either to support or to undermine good collaboration. When parents justifiably regard the teacher as a professional and expert, the environment can impose limits on the conditions of cooperation. When professional expertise served as a tool of power against parental vulnerability in confrontational or conflictual situations, trust was threatened or even lost.

Although in Finland, parents' role in curriculum (FNBE, 2016) is described as active and collaborative, parents of children who need support cannot comprehensively assume that this will happen. The parents' spectrum of experiences varied from empowering to crippling

situations. Because the teacher occupies a central position in assessing the child's support needs and planning the suitable forms of support, the responsibility should be connected to autonomy. It is desirable that the work of the teachers committed to the planning and implementation of the support is appreciated by parents. In the same way, school communities must guide teachers for whom the right of students to support is still an unclear principle.

Definitionally, trust has been linked to vulnerability and the decision and willingness to be vulnerable. The precise interpretation of trust in decision-making is reflected in subsequent reactions. When schools or teachers provide disrespectful conditions for meetings or fail to provide relevant information, it leads to decisions that prompt strong resistance and disagreement. Disagreement is a sign of distrust (Lepsius, 2017) and, in this sense, is not a decision to be vulnerable but rather a decision to no longer remain silent in the face of authority. The concept of vulnerability shifts from a patronising interpretation to one which is orientated towards social justice. The key question is whether trust inherently encompasses both trust and its absence. If so, it should be more precisely described in research on trust in educational settings.

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