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Dyadic trust relations between teachers and students – an empirical study about conditions and effects of perceived trustworthiness in the classroom from a differential perspective

Abstract: This paper reports an empirical questionnaire study about three levels of dyadic trust relations in the classroom: students' trust in teachers, teachers' trust in students and the trust among classmates. Based on the differential theory of trust (Schweer 1996), the reciprocal nature of trust was examined using the concept of implicit theories of trust. Differential effects were found for the three dyads: Teachers' trust ratings for their students highly correlated with perceived social behaviour, while students' ratings on their teacher highly correlated with perceived quality of personal relation. Cluster analyses revealed linear relationships between levels of trust and behavioural, emotional, and cognitive correlates of trust for the student-teacher and student-student dyads. The results are discussed with respect to implications on theoretical aspects of trust research and as well as practical issues for teacher training.

Keywords: trust, dyadic teacher-student-interaction, differential perspective, correlates of trust, class room

Dyadische Vertrauensbeziehungen zwischen Lehrer/innen und Schüler/innen - eine empirische Studie über Bedingungen und Effekte wahrgenommener Vertrauenswürdigkeit im Klassenzimmer aus differentieller Sicht

Zusammenfassung In einer empirischen Fragebogenstudie wurden drei Ebenen dyadischen Vertrauens im Klassenzimmer untersucht: Vertrauen von Schüler/innen in Lehrer/innen, Vertrauen von Lehrer/innen in Schüler/innen und Vertrauen unter Schüler/innen. Basierend auf der differentiellen Vertrauentheorie (Schweer 1996) standen reziproke Auswirkungen von impliziten Vertrauentheorien im Fokus. Es wurden differentielle Effekte in den untersuchten drei Dyaden gefunden: Die Einschätzungen der Lehrkräfte zum Vertrauen in ihre Schüler/innen korrelierten hoch mit deren wahrgenommenem Sozialverhalten, während die diesbezüglichen Einschätzungen der Schüler/innen mit der wahrgenommenen Qualität des persönlichen Verhältnisses zu ihren Lehrkräften in bedeutsamen Zusammenhang stand. Eine Clusteranalyse zeigte lineare Zusammenhänge zwischen drei Intensitäten erlebten Vertrauens mit kognitiven, affektiven und behavioralen Korrelaten von Vertrauen in den Lehrer-Schüler und Schüler-Schüler Dyaden. Die Ergebnisse werden diskutiert mit Blick auf theoretische Implikationen für die Vertrauensforschung sowie hinsichtlich praktischer Anwendungen in der Aus- und Fortbildung für (angehende) Lehrkräfte.

Schlüsselworte: Vertrauen, dyadische Lehrer-Schüler-Interaktion, differentielle Perspektive, Korrelate von Vertrauen, Klassenzimmer

1. Theoretical background

The importance of the concept of trust in the educational context has been increasingly recognized, and a growing body of literature supports the idea that trustworthy relationships between teachers and students are fundamentally important, both for students' ability to learn (Raider-Roth 2005; Schweer/Bertow 2006) and for effective teaching (Schweer, 2008; Thies, 2005). Within a trustful relationship, teachers can anticipate students' behaviour and feel more secure in their pedagogical decisions (Corlett 2007; Schweer 2010), and students feel encouraged to actively participate in lessons without the fear of being compromised by the teacher (Gregory/Ripski 2008; Schweer 2008). Perceived trust fosters students' motivation, engagement and self-estimated quality of learning results (Schweer/Lachner 2011). On the part of the teachers, psycho-social health and job satisfaction increases within a climate of confidence in the classroom (Klassen/Chiu 2010; Watson/Ecken 2003).

The majority of research papers in this field focus mainly on the student perspective (i.e., how students trust their teachers), and only a few address the teacher's perspective on trust in the teacher-student relationship (e.g., Durnford 2010). Even less papers analyse trust between teachers and students from a reciprocal perspective (except: Thies 2005). In the current paper, we argue that for empirical research on trust in the classroom, a dyadic perspective on teacher-student relationships is necessary in order to adequately account for the reciprocal nature of trust: only if individual expectations about a trustworthy person and experienced behaviour coincide, trust will be mutually established (Schweer 2008). This is especially true for the school environment which is characterized by an uneven distribution of power between teachers and students. The current paper¹ is an attempt to pursue such an approach in an empirical study about conditions and effects of perceived trustworthiness in the classroom, conducted in ten classes (8th and 9th grade) at three schools in Germany.

On the phenomenon of trust, a variety of theoretical conceptions exist in the literature. In the current article, trust is defined as "[...] the subjective feeling of security that allows to put oneself in the hands of other persons or institutions [...]" (Schweer 1999, 2, translation by the authors). One important aspect is whether trust is conceptualized as a personal or a situational variable. One group of researches defines trust as a stable personality variable, implying that generalized predictions about trust-related behaviour of an individual are possible for most situations (Rotter 1971; Yamagishi 2011). Others stress the situational determinants that influence whether an individual will trust another person (Deutsch 1962; Dikken 2001). Both approaches have been criticized for the isolated, one-sidedness of views (Schweer 1996). The current study is based on the differential theory of trust (Schweer 1996; 2008; see Fig. 1), which integrates both views above and states that trust results from complex interactions between situational and personal factors that influence situational perception and individual behaviour. This dynamic-transactional perspective has become a prominent paradigm in psychological research (cf. Magnusson 2001; Mischel 2004) and dates back to Lewin (1935), who founded the idea that behaviour (B) is always a function of person (P) and environment (E), expressed in the formula $B = f \{ P E \}$. Thus, in order to better understand the phenomenon of trust, a differential perspective that considers both personal and situational aspects and their complex interactions appears adequate, with reference to a phenomenologically-oriented approach (cf. Landridge 2006).

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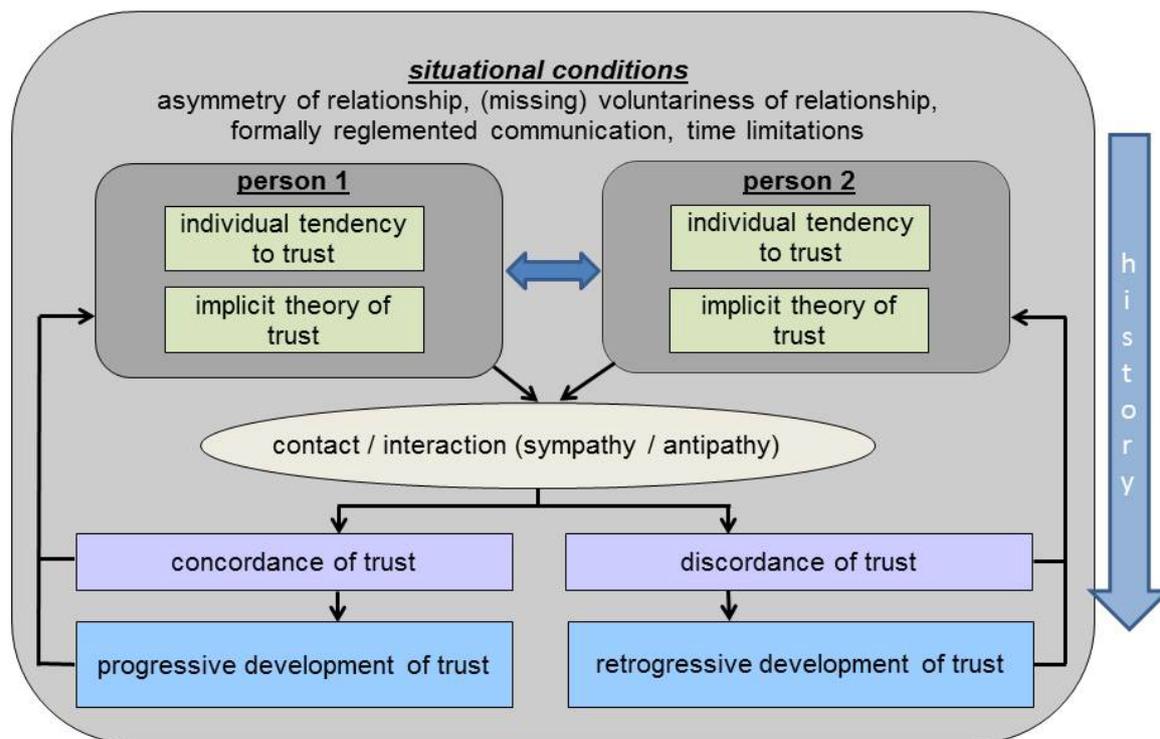


Fig. 1: main features of the differential theory of trust (Schweer 1996; 2008), shown in a dyadic relation

As shown in Fig. 1, personal interactions are embedded in a specific situational frame - for the school context, the asymmetry of power, missing voluntariness of the relationship, formal regulation of communication etc. are to be mentioned. Within this environmental frame, individuals with different roles, experience, expectations and norms about trust meet and interact. On the personal level, each individual has a certain individual tendency to trust, and also implicit theories of trust: The individual tendency to trust relates to the idea that individuals systematically vary in their general disposition to trust another person. The implicit theories of trust contain normative expectations and beliefs about attributes and behaviours of a trustworthy person. When two individuals meet and interact, the first contact is crucial for the development or non-development of trust: If one's own implicit expectations about a trustworthy person match with the perceived behaviour, a concordance of trust results and trust within the dyadic relationship is likely to increase progressively. In contrast, if one's expectations do not match the perceived attributes of another person, the discordance of trust makes a retrogressive development of trust likely (Schweer 1996; 2008). The concordant or discordant features feed back into the situational perception and implicit theories (see Figure 1) and further amplify the effect of perceived match or mismatch. Furthermore, the situational perception of one dyadic interaction is influenced by the history of past interactions, for example, imagine a case of a long lasting conflict between one teacher and student versus a good, positive established mentor-mentee-relationship.

The present study focuses on implicit theories of trust (cf. Schweer 1996; 2008) of teachers and students. This concept has been largely neglected so far, even though it yields substantial potential for theoretical and practical implications: Implicit theories are non-reflected, experience-based assumptions that are sensitive to phenomena of social perception, including prejudice, stereotypes, categorisation processes etc. (Haselhuhn/Schweitzer/Kray 2008). Our underlying assumption is that implicit theories of trust play a predominant role in the development of dyadic interactions. Scientific understanding of such processes in the

context of development of trust can generate new insights both for practical interventions to foster trust relationships in the classroom and a better theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of trust.

In the current study, three levels of trust within the classroom were regarded: teacher's trust in students, student's trust in teachers and trust among students. The operationalization, design of questionnaires and data collection was put into practice within a research training project with students of a Master of Education course under supervision of scientific staff. For the operationalization of the relevant aspects and dimensions of trust in the described dyads, specific research findings were incorporated (cf. Fig. 2). Following van Maele and van Houte (2010), for teacher's trust in students, the perceived "teachability" (p.87) was selected as an important indicator; teachability in this case is operationalized as students' school performance and their social and learning behaviour. For relationships among students, the operationalization of trust followed the findings of Cocard (2010), and three indicators of perceived trust were selected: secrecy, understanding and honesty. Student's perceived trust in teachers was measured, according to Schweer (2008), using the dimensions support, approachability, respect and truthfulness.

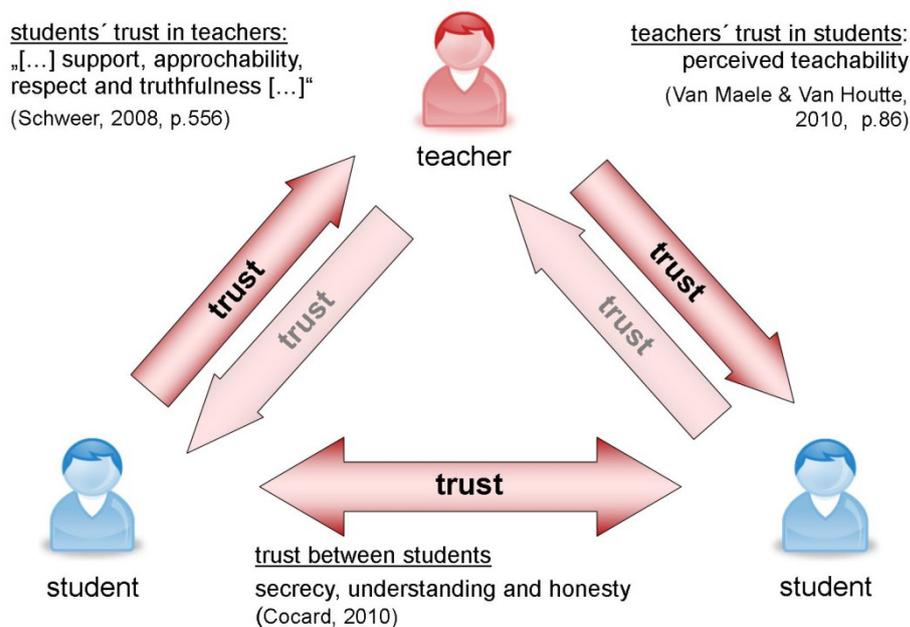


Fig. 2: Three levels of dyadic trust relationships that are analyzed in this paper, and operationalization of trust-related concepts

2. Methods

The questionnaire-study about implicit theories of trust was conducted in ten classes at three schools (8th and 9th grade) in the Province of Lower Saxony in Germany.

2.1 Questionnaires

Based on the concepts and methods described above, three questionnaires were constructed, one for each dyadic relationship. Each questionnaire contained 29 to 31 questions about different aspects of trust, all using five-point-Likert scales, anchored both verbally and symbolically (see Tab. 1). Furthermore, participants indicated their sex and the sex of the person they rated. Tab. 1 shows some exemplars for items used in the questionnaire, one example item per dimension per dyad.

Tab. 1: Exemplar items and scale reliabilities for the three dyadic trust relations, one item shown per scale. All items were Likert-scaled: “++ strongly agree, + agree, 0 neither agree nor disagree, - disagree, -- strongly disagree”. Additionally, general trust for the rated person was also measured using one item in all dyads (“I have high trust in my student / teacher / neighbour”)

scale (number of items)	student-teacher example item	Cronbach's α , N
justice (9)	“I trust that my teacher's exams are fair.”	.781; N=119
help (10)	“I trust that my teacher will help me.”	.652; N=106
personal relation (11)	“My teacher and I treat each other with respect.”	.899; N=114
	teacher-student	
performance (9)	“I feel that my student cares about good learning results.”	.905; N=64
social behaviour (9)	“My student always tries to solve a conflict peacefully.”	.932; N=65
learning behaviour (9)	“I give my student responsibility for self-contained learning.”	.768; N=64
	student-student	
sympathy (9)	“I think my neighbour likes me.”	.809; N=133
helpfulness (9)	“My neighbour helps me whenever I'm in trouble.”	.840; N=130
similar interests (9)	“My neighbour and I share similar interests.”	.916; N=134

The three subscales for each of the three dyadic questionnaires were constructed based on the theoretical and empirical considerations described in Fig. 2. and named as indicated in Tab. 1. Each scale contained items about cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of trust, according to the notion that these three dimensions reflect major aspects of trust as a social attitude (Schweer/Padberg 2002). A pretest of the first version of the questionnaires was conducted with N = 82 in University classes, and several modifications of individual items were performed for the final versions.

2.2 Participants

Participants were recruited from ten classes at three secondary modern schools (German Hauptschule and Realschule) in Lower Saxony. 10 teachers (7 female, 3 male) rated 65 individual students from their classes, 137 students (81 male, 56 female) rated their trust towards their seatmate, and 123 students (54 male, 55 female, 14 missing data) rated their trust towards their teacher.

Paper-and-pencil questionnaires were filled out during class. For reasons of practicability, a between-subject design was used, i.e., students were randomly assigned to rate either their trust towards their teacher or towards their seat neighbour, and teachers were instructed to judge five (or more) selected students, some of which they should highly trust, some of which low. Three teachers deliberately judged ten students each. The data collection procedure took between 30 to 45 minutes per class.

3. Results

All scales showed good to high reliability (Cronbach's α between .652 and .916; see Tab. 1), and item analysis confirmed that no item or scale had to be excluded from further analysis.

As shown in Tab. 2, on average, mean trust scores were substantially higher than the theoretical mean value of 2,5 on the five-point-scale for all three dyads:

Tab. 2: Mean trust ratings (M) and standard deviations (SD) (scale: 1 = *strongly disagree* resp. *very low*, 5 = *strongly agree* resp. *very high*) per dyad

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Teacher-student: "I have high trust in my student."	3.60	1.27	65
Student-teacher: "My trust into my teacher is ..."	3.40	1.06	123
Student-student: "I have high trust in my seatmate."	3.82	1.06	137

In the next step, mean scale values per participant for each of the three dimensions of trust were computed for all three dyads. These measures were submitted to correlational analyses.

3.1 Correlations between trust and related variables

Pearson correlation analyses show that each of the three mean scale scores highly correlate with the general trust items, respectively (see Tab. 3). Furthermore, all three scales highly correlate with one another in all dyads.² This indicates a high criterial validity of the dimensions used in the questionnaire.

For the teacher-student dyads, highest correlations with trust were found for the scale *social behaviour* ($r = .803^{**}$, $p < .001$). For student-teacher dyads, the scale *personal relation* correlated highest with trust ($r = .740^{**}$, $p < .001$), and for student-student relations, the scale *sympathy* showed highest correlations with trust ($r = .771^{**}$, $p < .001$).

² Due to small sample size, factor analytic analyses about dimensional aspects of trust were not performed.

Tab. 3: Correlations between mean scale scores (index) and general trust for all dyads. The general trust items were Likert-scaled: “++ *strongly agree* resp. *very high*, + *agree* resp. *high*, o *neither agree nor disagree* resp. *neutral*, - *disagree* resp. *low*, -- *strongly disagree* resp. *very low*”. All significance levels are Bonferroni-corrected to adjust for multiple comparisons.

correlations student-teacher				
		index justice	index help	index personal relation
“My trust into my teacher is...” (N=113)	correlation (Pearson)	.648**	.656**	.740**
	significance (two sided)	.001	.001	.001
	N	109	97	106
correlations teacher-student				
		index school performance	index social behaviour	index learning behaviour
“I have high trust in this student” (N=64)	correlation (Pearson)	.723**	.803**	.701**
	significance (two sided)	.001	.001	.001
	N	64	64	63
correlations student-student				
		index sympathy	index helpfulness	index similar interests
“I have high trust toward my seatmate” (N=137)	correlation (Pearson)	.800**	.790**	.771**
	significance (two sided)	.001	.001	.001
	N	133	130	134

For a differential analysis of three dyadic trust-relations on a classroom-level, six classes with sufficient sample sizes were selected. Fig. 3 shows the results of the average dyadic trust ratings per class.

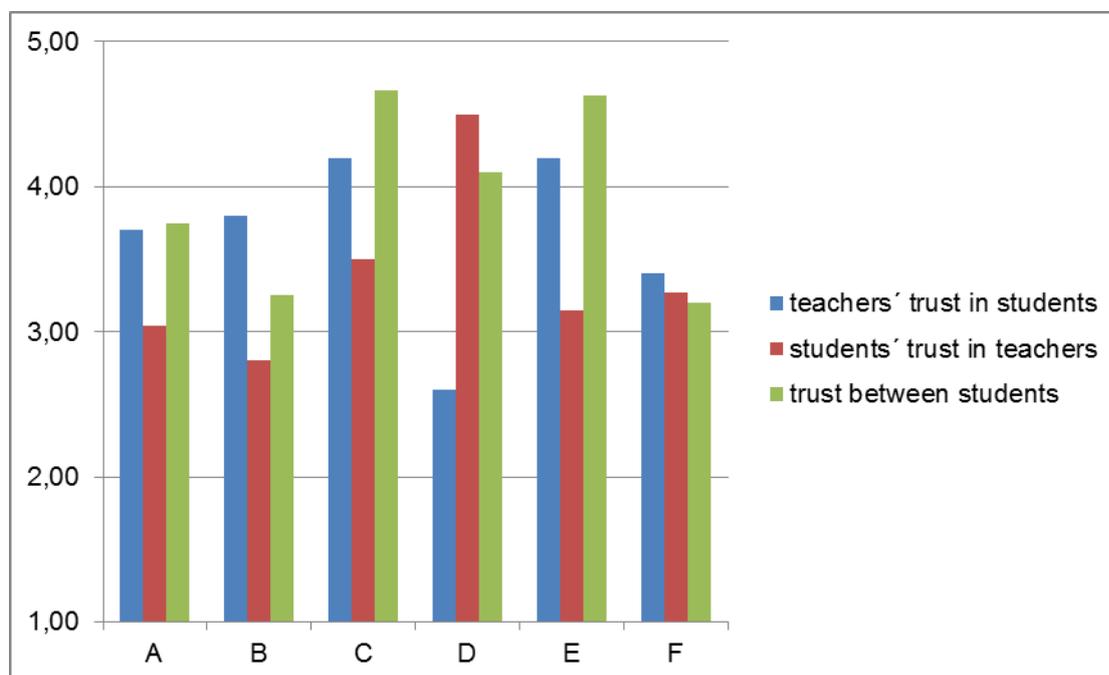


Fig. 3: Mean trust scores across three dyads per class: differential analysis for classes A to F

First, teachers' trust in students is generally higher than students' trust in teachers, apart from class D, where this relation is reversed: In this particular case, the lowest level of a teacher's trust towards students in the whole sample is opposed to the highest level of trust by the students towards a teacher. In four out of six classes, trust among students is higher than their trust in the teacher, apart from class D, where students' trust in the teacher reaches higher ratings than trust towards classmates. In class F, all three dyadic trust ratings were virtually on a same level.

Correlates of trust

Behavioural effects of trust in the classroom were analysed by correlating the behavioural items with the trust items. In the following, we highlight the highest correlations found. In the teacher-student dyad, trust was negatively correlated with control behaviour ($r = -.595^{**}$, $p < .005$; item "I often have to check if my student works thoroughly"), and a positive correlation was found between trust and allocation of responsibility to students for self-contained learning ($r = .707^{**}$, $p < .005$; "I give my student responsibility for self-contained learning").

For the student-teacher relation, positive correlations between trust and respectful treatment of each other ($r = .621^{**}$, $p < .005$; item "My teacher and I treat each other with respect") and the feeling that the teacher takes students seriously ($r = .597^{**}$, $p < .005$; item "I have the feeling that my teacher takes me seriously") was found.

Regarding the student-student dyad, trust correlated positively with the knowledge that one can address oneself to the seat neighbour with personal problems ($r = .749^{**}$, $p < .005$; item "I know that I can address myself to my neighbour when I have personal problems") and with reliance ($r = .726^{**}$, $p < .005$; item "I know I can rely on my neighbour").

3.2 Differential analysis of perceived trust

Cluster analyses were conducted in order to explore differential aspects of the relation between trust and selected behavioural, cognitive, and emotional correlates of trust. Due to small sample size in the teacher-student dyad, only student-teacher and student-student relations were analysed. Using an iterative cluster-centroid method with a three cluster solution, the following results were obtained:

The mean scores of the three clusters that represent high, medium and low levels of trust, respectively, indicate that the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural correlates of trust all scale in a linear fashion with the respective mean trust ratings (cf. Tab. 4 and Tab. 5).

Tab. 4: Mean values according to cluster centroids for student-teacher dyads; convergence reached after six iterations

	Cluster 1: high trust	Cluster 2: medium trust	Cluster 3: low trust
My trust towards my teacher is...	4.18	3.08	1.73
My teacher and I treat each other with respect.	4.62	3.51	2.27
I trust that my teacher will help me.	4.64	3.80	3.20
I have the feeling that my teacher likes me.	3.98	3.10	2.07
I feel my teacher grades me fairly.	4.27	3.65	2.93
I know that the teacher is going to take the time for me when I have questions during class.	4.22	3.41	2.67
I feel my teacher takes me seriously.	4.53	3.41	2.13
	N = 45	N = 49	N = 15
	Missing = 14		

The mean scores of items shown in Tab. 4 indicate how perceived trust is related to differential aspects of perceived student-teacher-interactions.

Tab. 5: Mean values according to cluster centroids for student-student dyads; convergence reached after six iterations

	Cluster 1: high trust	Cluster 2: medium trust	Cluster 3: low trust
I have high trust toward my seatmate...	4.70	3.69	1.95
I know that I can address myself to my neighbour when I have personal problems.	4.28	2.60	1.29
My seatmate stands by me when others give me trouble.	4.28	3.03	1.48
I feel safe around my seatmate.	4.65	3.54	1.95
I have the feeling that my seatmate likes me.	4.65	3.65	2.33
I know that my seatmate would not give my secrets away.	4.56	2.90	1.57
	N = 43	N = 63	N = 21
	Missing = 5		

As shown in Tab. 5, students' ratings on trust towards their seatmates are systematically and uniformly related to differential aspects of daily interactions between students.

3.3 Gender-effects

Several gender-related main-effects were found for trust-ratings in the different dyads. For the student-teacher dyad, a Oneway-ANOVA showed that on average, trust in male teachers was rated significantly higher by all students than trust in female teachers (M male teachers = 3.68, SD = 1.01; M female teachers = 3.14, SD = 1.00; $F(1,98) = 5.984$, $p = .016$). On the

other hand, average trust ratings for teachers were practically on the same level for male and female students (M male students = 3.29, SD = 1.04, M female students = 3.31, SD = 1.09).

A different pattern of results was found for the teacher-student dyad: Here, teachers gave higher trust ratings to female students on average, compared to male students (M female students = 4.22, SD = .85; M male students = 3.06, SD = 1.33; $F(1,62) = 15.902$, $p < .001$). Conversely, trust ratings by male and female teachers did not differ significantly from one another (M male = 3.50, SD = 1.29; M female = 3.58, SD = 1.29; $F(1,62) = .047$, $p = .830$).

For the student-student dyads, no significant differences related to trust were found on average between male and female seatmates.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The discussion and interpretation of the results is restricted by the methodological fact that a between-subject design had to be used in the study for reasons of practicability. This implies that the comparison of the three dyadic perspectives per class can only be interpreted on a classroom level, not on a truly individual dyadic level, since not all students who were rated by the teacher gave ratings for that teacher - half of them were instructed to rate their neighbour. Within this limitation, the quasi-random assignment of participants to the dyads and the instruction for the teachers to select five or more individuals for whom they feel different strengths of trust were taken as measures to allow for an interpretation on a classroom level, based on a meaningful sample. To the knowledge of the authors, this is the first study that considers three dyadic perspectives on trust relations simultaneously in the classroom context, only one earlier study investigated the teacher-student and student-teacher perspective in a reciprocal dyadic perspective (Thies 2005).

The general level of trust found in this study was considerably above average on the five-point-scale in all dyads in all classes. This is remarkable, especially for the teachers' perspective, since they had been instructed to rate both trustworthy and untrustworthy students. Furthermore, earlier findings that teachers perceive higher trust towards their students than students towards their teacher were replicated in the current study (cf. Fig. 3, and Thies 2005). One interesting finding was that in class D, the lowest level of teacher's trust toward students ($M = 2.60$) was opposed to the highest level of students' trust towards the teacher in the whole study ($M = 4.50$). The interpretation of this particular finding has to remain speculative, but it indicates the complex, sometimes non-reciprocal nature of dyadic trust in the classroom, and further research should elaborate on the dyadic perspective on an individual level, and also incorporate further variables in this relation, such as mutually perceived quality of interaction, perceived professional competence of the teacher, and individual emphasis of different trust-related aspects (i.e., individual tendency to trust and implicit theories of trust) that are specific to dyadic perspectives (cf. Thies 2005).

In the current study, teachers' trust ratings toward their students showed the highest correlations with perceived social behaviour of the students. This seems reasonable, since positive social behaviour of students is a prerequisite for teaching per se from the teacher's perspective. For the context of vocational training, observed social behaviour has also been found to be highly coupled with trust building between instructor and trainee (cf. Möller/Clement/Eberl 2012). For the student-teacher dyad, the perceived quality of personal relation correlated highest with trust. This appears plausible, especially in the context of non-symmetrical relations between teachers and students, and similar results have also been found in manager-subordinate-relations (cf. Schweer/Thies 2003). For the student-student dyad, sympathy and helpfulness showed highest correlations with trust. This finding will not

be interpreted here since it might be in part influenced by the fact that seat neighbours rated each other, and it was not controlled in the study whether students were free to choose seats or whether the seat arrangement was set by the teacher.

The cluster analyses for student-teacher and student-student dyads revealed that the three-cluster solutions differentiated between groups of individuals who perceive high, medium or low trust toward the teacher or seatmate, respectively. It was found that behavioural, emotional and cognitive correlates of trust all scaled in a linear fashion with the overall trust ratings in both dyadic relations. The clearness and uniformity of this result is somewhat surprising, and it highlights the importance of trust as a fundamental relational variable in the classroom. Future studies with a dynamic-transactional approach should elaborate on a mutual dyadic perspective on trust and look for differential interactions between personal and situational factors in a wider scope than in the current study, such as self-efficacy, motivation, professional competency, etc. The comparison of self-reported judgments and ratings by interaction partners would be especially interesting (cf. Thies 2005).

Gender-related main effects were found both for student-teacher and teacher-student dyads. While students rated male teachers as more trustworthy than female teachers, male students were rated as less trustworthy by teachers than female students. Because of the small sample size, this finding has to be interpreted with caution, but findings from other fields of gender-research might serve as an orientation. The fact that in student-teacher perspective, male teachers were rated as more trustworthy might be related to findings about the relation between trust and perceived competency: On the one hand, it has been found that perceived professional competency is a crucial factor for students' trust towards teachers (see Hoy/Tschannen-Moran 1999), and findings from occupational psychology show that male persons are generally ascribed higher leadership competencies (see, e.g., Connerley/Mecham/Strauss 2008; Vaske/Schweer 2013). On the other hand, females are generally ascribed higher social competencies than males, especially in the context of leadership and management (cf., e.g., Eagly 2007). It remains unclear in how far gender-related differential perceptions and expectations of oneself and the interaction partner are relevant in the context of implicit theories of trust in dyadic teacher-student relations, and future research may address gender as one potential influential factor within the dynamic-transactional paradigm.

The finding that teachers generally perceive higher trust towards female than to male students has also been reported earlier (van Maele/van Houtte 2010). The fact that in our study, teachers' trust towards students correlated highly with students' social behaviour is in accordance with the opinion that female students generally show more pro-social behaviour (cf. Crick/Grotperter 1995). This hypothetical presumption about gender-related perception of pro-social behaviour in the school context should be explicitly addressed in future research.

In summary, the fundamental importance of trust as a basic relational variable in the classroom was corroborated in the current study. It was also shown that traditional, one-dimensional studies on the phenomenon of trust that analyse only one perspective are insufficient. Follow up studies should add qualitative interviews to further clarify perceptual and situational effects of implicit theories of trust that are specific to dyads, and incorporate truly dyadic measures of trust in a within-subject design. The addition of further external measures (i.e., performance, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, role expectations etc.) would broaden the scope of understanding of the complex role of trust in the system classroom / school. The findings of the current study imply that for teacher training, raising the awareness for teachers about the influence of implicit theories in the process of social perception would be appropriate.

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