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Parent-Teacher Trust and School Involvement

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Expected Learning Outcomes

- There are differences in mothers' and fathers' trust in teacher and in their school involvement.
- There are differences in parental trust and school involvement between parents of boys and parents of girls.
- Parental trust and school involvement are associated during primary school years.
- Teachers need to be aware of how trust is built differently among mothers and fathers

Parental Trust in Teacher

Previous literature has shown the importance of parent-teacher interaction for a child's development of social (Serpell & Mashburn, 2011) and academic skills (Cook, Dearing, & Zachrisson, 2018) and underlines the benefits of parental involvement in school (Jeynes, 2011). The literature also notes that when parents trust in their child's teacher, they are more likely to get involved in school (Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016). Trust can be defined as "an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open" (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 189). According to Baier (1986), trusting is letting someone take care of something you care about. Trust involves elements of choice, risk, and vulnerability (Baier, 1986; Frowe, 2005).

In their theory of trust, Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) define three dimensions of trust: predictability, dependability, and faith. The first dimension, predictability, refers to consistent behavior, which makes it easier to predict one's actions and trust in him/her. The second dimension, dependability, is focused not on actions but on qualities and characteristics, such as reliability and honesty, that make a person trustworthy. The third and most important dimension, faith, refers to a belief that a person will act in a responsible way. Faith is necessary in addition to evidence from a person's behavior and character qualities.

Several studies have demonstrated the importance of trust within schools and between schools and stakeholders (e.g., students and parents). First, in schools where trust between different parties is high, there is a higher desire for school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Second, in schools where teachers' trust in students and parents is high, student achievement is higher in mathematics and reading (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Third, parental trust in teacher is related to children's higher prosocial behavior, fewer peer problems (Santiago et al., 2016), and better academic achievement in terms of reading (Pennycuff, 2009). Fourth, according to a study by Adams and Christenson (2000), high school students whose parents trusted in their teachers completed more courses and attended school more consistently. Moreover, in schools where parents demonstrate trust in the school and the principal, students' academic performance is higher than in schools where parents have lower trust in the school and the principal (Forsyth, Barnes, & Adams, 2006).

It seems that trust in teacher is highest when a child is in early elementary school and declines when the child moves to higher educational levels (Adams & Christenson, 2000). In the school context, trust is built between teachers, principals, students, and parents if there is mutual respect, personal regard, role competence, and integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). In the parent-

teacher relationship, communication is a key element in developing, maintaining, and increasing parental trust in teacher (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Angell, Stoner, & Shelden, 2009; Chang, 2013). Parents' perception of teachers' pedagogical practices in the classroom and with their child affects their level of trust in teachers. For example, one study showed that the more child-centered a teacher's practices are, the higher a mother's trust in the teacher is during her child's first school year (Lerkkanen, Kikas, Pakarinen, Poikonen, & Nurmi, 2013). Moreover, it is important that teachers recognize children's academic, emotional, and social needs (Angell et al., 2009; Chang, 2013) and share the same values as parents (Keyes, 2002). Difficulties in building trust between parents and teachers may occur due to their role differences, power inequities, and the temporary nature of the relationship (Holtz, 2010).

Parental trust in teacher might be related to gender, either their own or their child's. So far, there is a lack of research on differences between mothers' and fathers' levels of trust, and studies have resulted in mixed findings concerning the influence of a child's gender on parental trust in teacher. Although some studies have shown no significant association between a child's gender and parental trust in his or her teacher (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Kikas, Poikonen, et al. 2011), a study by Lerkkanen, Kikas, Pakarinen, Poikonen, and Nurmi (2013) showed that in Estonia, mothers of girls trusted their child's first grade teacher more than mothers of boys did; however, the same was not true in Finland. Moreover, Powell, Son, File, and San Juan (2010) reported that parents perceived the responsiveness of their child's pre-kindergarten teacher differently depending on their child's gender. One reason behind the possible gender differences in parent-teacher trust may be boys' lower quality of teacher-student relationship (Hughes & Kwok, 2007), which might be reflected in the parent-teacher relationship. Because of these somewhat contradictory findings concerning the role of the child's gender, together with the

shortage of knowledge of the role of parents' own gender in parent-teacher trust, more research is needed on the determinants of parental trust in teacher.

Parental School Involvement

Parental school involvement is important in enhancing child development in terms of academic achievement (von Otter, 2014; Pennycuff, 2009; Sebastian, Moon, & Cunningham, 2017), motivation (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004), behavior, development of social skills (El Nokali, Bachman & Votruba-Drzal, 2010), and self-concept (Hung, 2005).

Epstein (1995) has introduced six types of parental involvement: 1) parenting, 2) communicating, 3) volunteering, 4) learning at home, 5) decision making, and 6) collaborating with the community. Epstein (1995) emphasizes the importance of having school-like families and family-like schools. School-like families support children's learning and show appreciation for school, whereas family-like schools appreciate and recognize children and their families.

Based on Epstein's (1995) six types of involvement, Fantuzzo, Tighe, and Childs (2000) have divided involvement into three categories: school-based involvement, home-based involvement, and home-school conferencing. School-based involvement can mean, for example, volunteering in the classroom, going on class trips, or meeting other parents. Home-based involvement can consist of, for instance, bringing learning materials home or working on a child's math or reading skills. Home-school conferencing includes talking with the teacher about different issues related to, for example, a child's learning. Previous studies of parental involvement have shown that home-based involvement is the most common type of involvement (Kikas, Peets et al., 2011), and it predicts parents' involvement in school (Murray, McFarland-Piazza, & Harrison, 2015). Parental involvement seems to decrease over the course of a child's

primary school years (Graham, 2015; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Kikas, Peets, et al., 2011).

From the parents' perspective, it is the school's responsibility to provide opportunities for involvement (Baker, Wise, Kelley, & Skiba, 2016; Sormunen, Tossavainen, & Turunen, 2011). Most teachers support parental involvement via formal parent-teacher meetings and orientation activities, while some also use newsletters and social activities (Murray et al., 2015). From the parents' perspective, unclear or insufficient communication (Baker et al., 2016) as well as parents' own stress (Vera et al., 2017) can be a barrier for involvement.

Parental involvement can differ between mothers and fathers and between parents of boys and parents of girls. Several studies have reported that mothers' school involvement is higher than fathers' (Fleischmann & de Haas, 2016; Hung, 2005). Mothers are more active in ways like attending parental meetings, participating in cooperation committees, and helping their child with schoolwork (Räty, Kasanen, & Laine, 2009). Regarding the role of a child's gender in parental involvement, earlier research has yielded contradictory results. Some studies have reported that a child's gender is not related to parental involvement (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Graham, 2015), whereas other studies have shown that parents of boys are more in contact with their preschool (McWayne et al., 2008) or school (Mantz et al., 2004). According to Räty et al. (2009), parents of boys experience more inability to help their child in schoolwork than parents of girls.

Trust and Parental Involvement

Previous research has found several associations between trust and involvement in the school context. First, it is important that teachers trust different stakeholders. In schools where

teachers show trust in their colleagues, the principal, students, and parents, they also collaborate more with these parties (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). In a similar way, parental trust in teacher is important in terms of parental involvement. Studies have shown parental trust in teachers and schools to be related to their school involvement in primary (Pennycuff, 2009; Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016), secondary, and high schools (Beycioglu, Ozer, & Sahin, 2013). One of the three aspects of parental involvement, home-school collaboration, seems especially to be related to trust: parents who are actively involved in home-school collaboration have higher trust in their children's teachers (Kikas, Peets, et al. 2011). Moreover, parents who feel that the teacher has invested in their child are more involved than parents who have lower trust in the teacher (Vera et al., 2017). Although previous research has shown the connection between parental trust and school involvement, there is a need to examine if parental trust predicts subsequent school involvement or vice versa to deepen the understanding of the longitudinal associations between trust and involvement.

Finnish Educational System

The present study was conducted in Finland, where compulsory formal education consists of six years in primary school and three years in lower secondary school. Compulsory kindergarten education is also provided for children the year before they begin primary school at age seven. In primary school, one classroom teacher teaches almost every subject for the students. Typically, the same teacher teaches students from grade one to grade two and from grade three to grade six. Teachers have high professional competence, and they have a master's degree in education.

Finnish parents usually have relatively high trust in their child's teacher (Lerkkanen et al., 2013). They also see collaboration with the school as important and are therefore willing to

take part in it (Sormunen et al., 2011). The most common avenues for parental school involvement in Finland are participating in parents' meetings and helping one's child with homework or test preparation (Räty et al., 2009). Although Finland's national curriculum expects teacher-parent collaboration and parental school involvement, Finnish parents usually come to school only when they are invited and do not take part in everyday school life (Sormunen et al., 2011).

Present Study

The aim of the present study was to examine how parents' trust in their child's teacher is associated with their involvement in school collaboration during their child's primary school years (grades 1 to 4 and 6). The following research questions were investigated:

1. Do mothers and fathers differ in their trust in the teacher and in their school involvement?
2. Are there differences in parental trust in the teacher and in parental school involvement related to the child's gender?
3. To what extent does parental trust in the teacher predict parental school involvement during their child's primary school years, and vice versa?

Method

Participants and Procedure.

The present study is part of a larger, longitudinal research project called the First Steps Study (Lerkkanen et al., 2006). The First Steps Study followed approximately 2000 children from four Finnish municipalities from kindergarten through high school to investigate, for

example, the development of children's academic and social skills and the quality of teacher-student interactions and teaching practices. Participants in the present study were children's parents (ranging between 1,469 mothers in Grade 1 and 768 mothers in Grade 6 and 1,003 fathers in Grade 1 and 422 fathers in Grade 6). The reason for the decrease in the number of participants from Grade 1 to Grade 6 was the fact that the first study period included grades 1 to 4, and the second phase started with new funding when the children were in grade 6. At that point, not all the children were participating in the study anymore; some families had moved from these locations, and some children were repeating fifth grade.

Parental data were collected in the spring of their child's first, second, third, fourth, (2008–2011) and sixth school years (2013), when parents completed questionnaires on their trust in their child's classroom teacher and on their involvement in school collaboration. The mothers' ages ranged from 24 to 67 ($M = 38.44$, $SD = 5.41$), and the fathers' ages ranged from 27 to 69 ($M = 41.02$, $SD = 5.82$). A total of 66.5% of families consisted of married spouses and their biological children; 11.6% of families consisted of unmarried spouses and their biological children; 7.6% of families consisted of spouses and children from previous relationships; and 12.2% of families consisted of a single parent with children. Parents' education varied as follows: 4.2% had only nine years of comprehensive school, 26.1% had a degree from a vocational school or high school, 36.4% held a bachelor's degree, and 33.4% had a master's degree or higher. Parents' participation in the study was voluntary, and all the parents gave written consent for their and their children's participation. Most of the families (98%) were native Finnish-speaking families.

Measures.

Parental involvement. Family Involvement Questionnaire (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000) was used to measure parental involvement in collaboration with the school. The measure originally consisted of 42 items, seven of which were included in the First Steps Study questionnaire, based on factor analysis (Lerkkanen et al., 2006). The present study left out two of the seven items to improve the reliability of the two constructed domains: 1) collaboration with the teacher and other parents and 2) participation in parent meetings. The first domain, *collaboration with the teacher and other parents*, consists of three items (e.g., “I talk with other parents about school meetings and events”) that were originally part of the school-based involvement domain of the Family Involvement Questionnaire. This domain’s reliability was good at all measurement points for both mothers ($\alpha = .66$ to $.71$) and fathers ($\alpha = .67$ to $.73$). The second domain, *participation in parent meetings*, includes two items (e.g., “I attend conferences with the teacher to talk about my child’s learning and behavior”) that are part of the home-school conferencing domain of the original inventory. The domain’s reliability was good at all measurement points for both mothers ($\alpha = .69$ to $.73$) and fathers ($\alpha = .78$ to $.83$). All items were answered on a scale from one (never) to five (very often).

Parental trust. Parental trust in their child’s teacher was measured with the Trust scale that is part of the larger Family-School Relationships Survey (Adams & Christenson, 2000). The Trust scale involves 19 items, of which six that were culturally meaningful in the Finnish context and had the strongest factor loadings (e.g., “Teacher is doing a good job encouraging my child’s sense of self-esteem”) were used in the First Steps Study (see Lerkkanen et al., 2013). Items were rated with a scale from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). A mean score of the six items was used in the present study as an indicator of parental trust (mothers $\alpha = .69$ to $.73$; fathers $\alpha = .78$ to $.83$).

Data Analysis.

The data analyses were carried out in the following way. First, the associations between the study variables were examined with the Pearson correlation using IBM SPSS Statistics 24. As a next step, independent samples *t*-test was used to examine possible differences between mothers and fathers and between parents of boys and parents of girls in their trust in their child's teacher and in their school involvement. All participants (768–1469 mothers and 422–1003 fathers at different measurement points) were included in the *t*-test analysis. Finally, cross-lagged path models were constructed using Mplus version 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012) to examine the extent to which parents' trust in the teacher predicts their school involvement during their child's primary school years or vice versa. Sample of 768 mothers and 422 fathers who filled in the questionnaire at every measurement point was included in the cross-lagged path models.

Results

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, parental trust in teacher was relatively high during the child's primary school years, whereas the frequency of collaboration with teacher and other parents was not as high; mothers and fathers rarely collaborated with teacher and other parents. Mothers participated in parent meetings often, and fathers sometimes (see Figure 3). Trust in teacher was correlated with collaboration with teacher and other parents (mothers: *r* varied between .07, $p \leq .05$ and .21, $p < .001$; fathers: *r* varied between .11, $p < .01$ and .28, $p < .001$) at every grade level. Parents' trust in the teacher and participation in parent meetings were positively associated at almost every grade level (mothers: *r* varied between .07, $p \leq .05$ and .24, $p < .001$; fathers: *r* varied between .12, $p \leq .05$ and .25, $p < .001$)

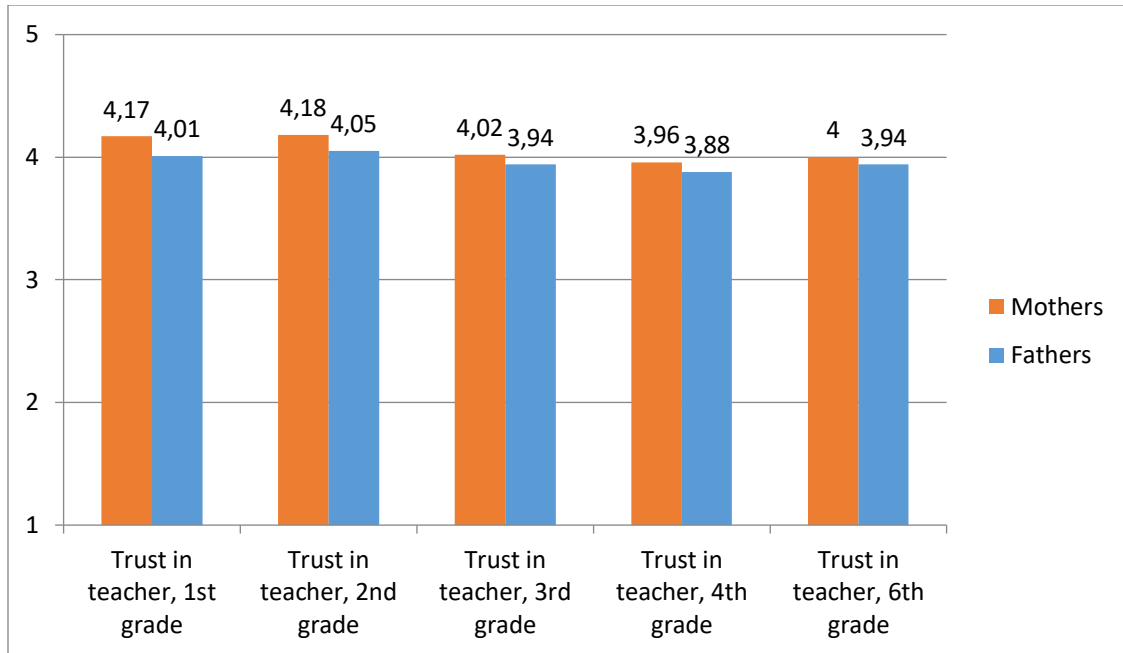


Figure 1 Mothers' and fathers' trust in their child's teacher during primary school, means

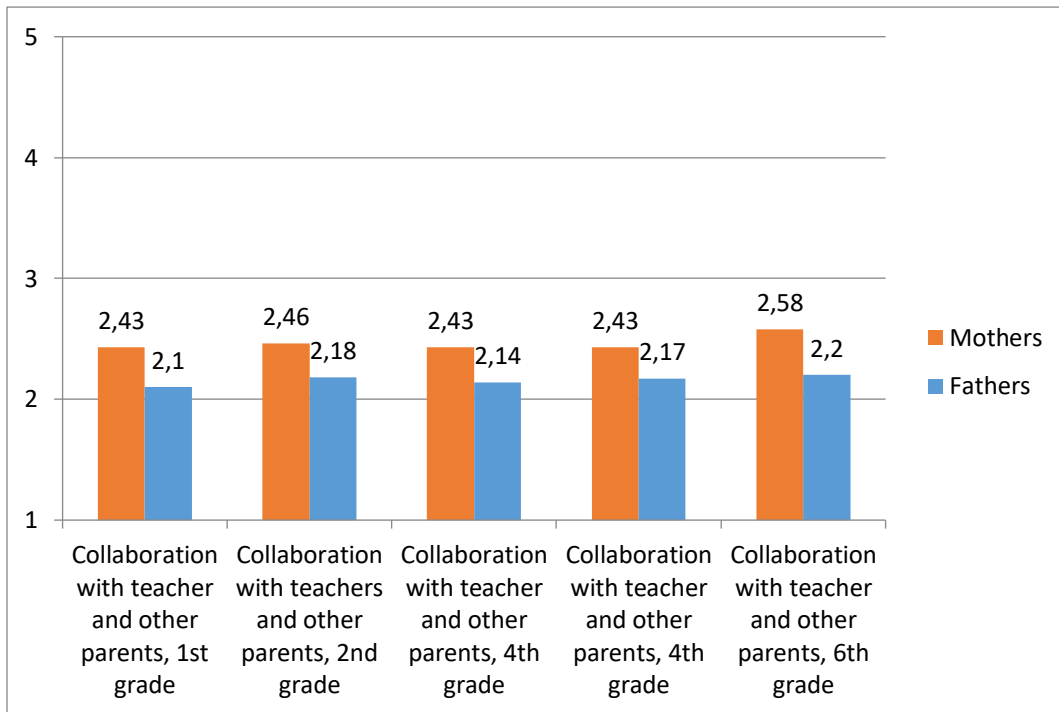


Figure 2 Mothers' and fathers' collaboration with teacher and other parents during primary school, means

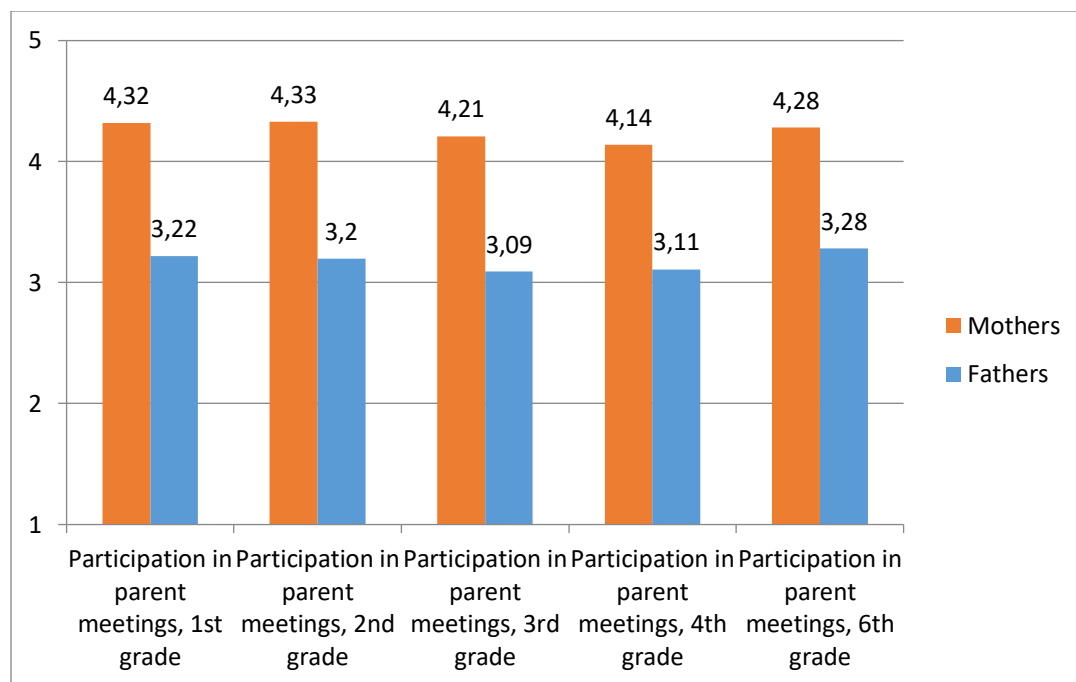


Figure 3 Mothers' and fathers' participation in parent meetings during primary school, means

Differences in Parental Trust and Involvement.

The results of the *t*-test showed that mothers trusted more in teachers than fathers did across grades 1–4 (*t* varied between 2.47, $p \leq .05$ and 5.57, $p < .001$). There were no significant differences in trust between mothers and fathers in sixth grade. Furthermore, mothers' collaboration with teacher and other parents ($t = 7.71 - 10.66$, $p < .001$) as well as participation in parent meetings (t varied between 17.40 and 28.33, $p < .001$) was higher than that of fathers during the primary school years. Parents of boys and parents of girls did not differ in their trust in teacher nor did mothers in their collaboration with teacher and other parents or in participation in parent meetings. However, fathers of boys were more involved in collaboration with teacher and other parents than fathers of girls in fourth grade ($t = -2.09$, $p \leq .05$) and participated in parental meetings more in second ($t = -3.5$, $p < .001$) and fourth grade ($t = -2.25$, $p \leq .05$) than fathers of girls.

Cross-Lagged Paths between Trust and Involvement.

Next, cross-lagged path models were specified to examine the associations between mothers' and fathers' trust in teacher and their collaboration with teacher and other parents. The results (Figure 4) showed that mothers' collaboration with teacher and other parents predicted their trust in teacher from third grade to fourth grade and from fourth grade to sixth grade. Moreover, mothers' collaboration with teacher and other parents at second grade predicted their trust in teacher at third grade, albeit marginally significantly. As shown in Figure 5, fathers' trust in their child's teacher predicted their collaboration with teacher and other parents from third grade to fourth grade and from fourth grade to sixth grade. Furthermore, fathers' collaboration with teacher and other parents in first grade predicted their trust in their child's teacher in second grade, albeit marginally significantly. Both mothers' and fathers' trust and collaboration with teacher and other parents were relatively stable during their child's primary school years. The model fit the data well (Byrne, 2012) for both mothers [$\chi^2(18, n = 768) = 43.637, p < 0.01$; CFI = .988; RMSEA = .043; SRMR = .024] and fathers [$\chi^2(18, n = 422) = 28.596, p = .054$; CFI = .992; RMSEA = .037; SRMR = .024].

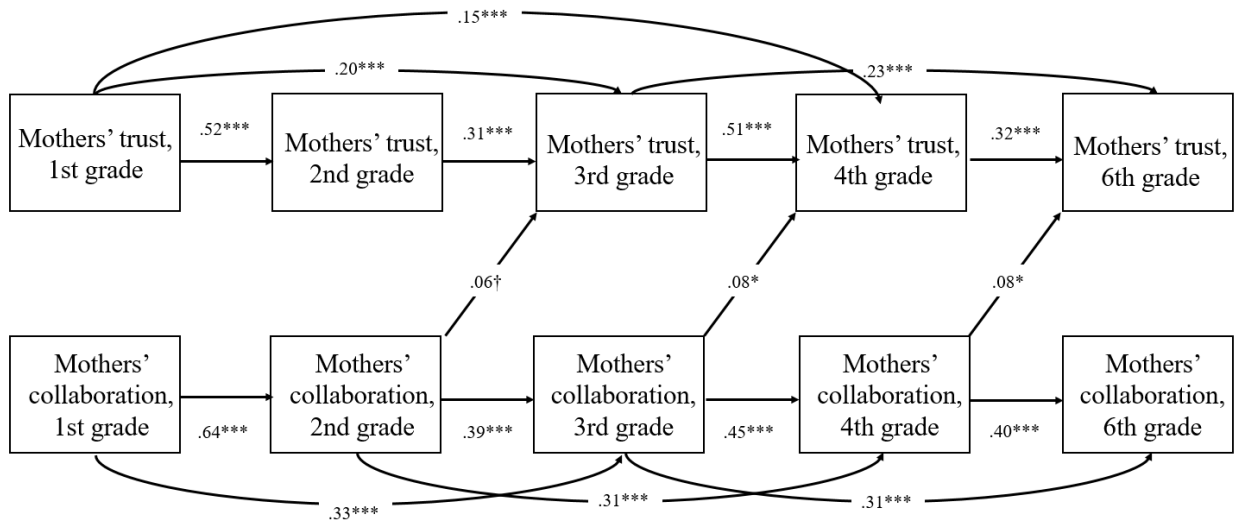


Figure 4 Cross-lagged path model: mothers' trust in their child's teacher and collaboration with the teacher and other parents during primary school. Note: Standardized estimates. Only significant associations are shown.

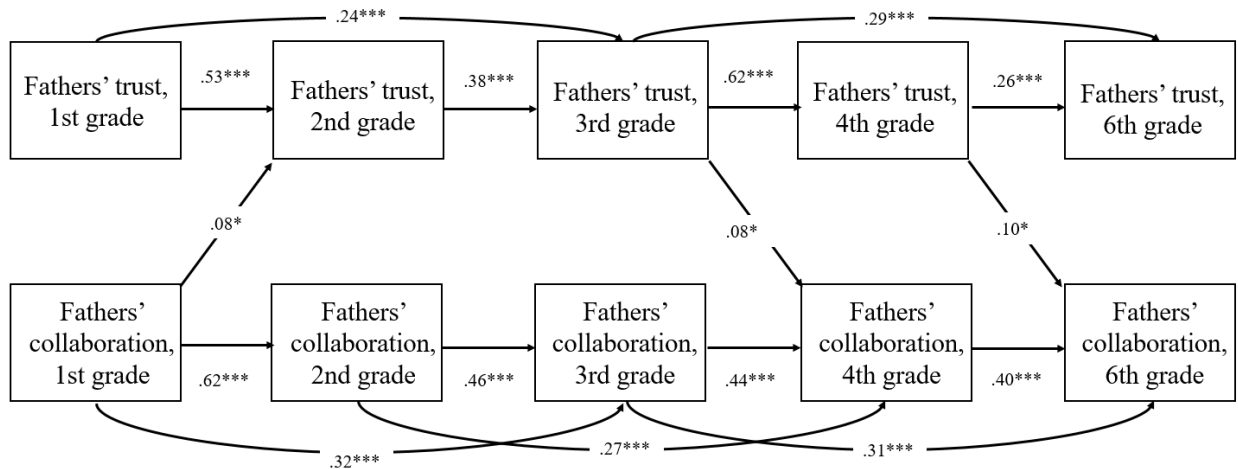


Figure 5 Cross-lagged path model: fathers' trust in their child's teacher and collaboration with the teacher and other parents during primary school. Note: Standardized estimates. Only significant associations are shown.

Second, separate cross-lagged path models were constructed to examine the associations between mothers' and fathers' trust in teacher and participation in parent meetings. As shown in Figure 6, mothers' participation in parent meetings predicted their trust in their child's teacher from first grade to second grade and from fourth grade to sixth grade.

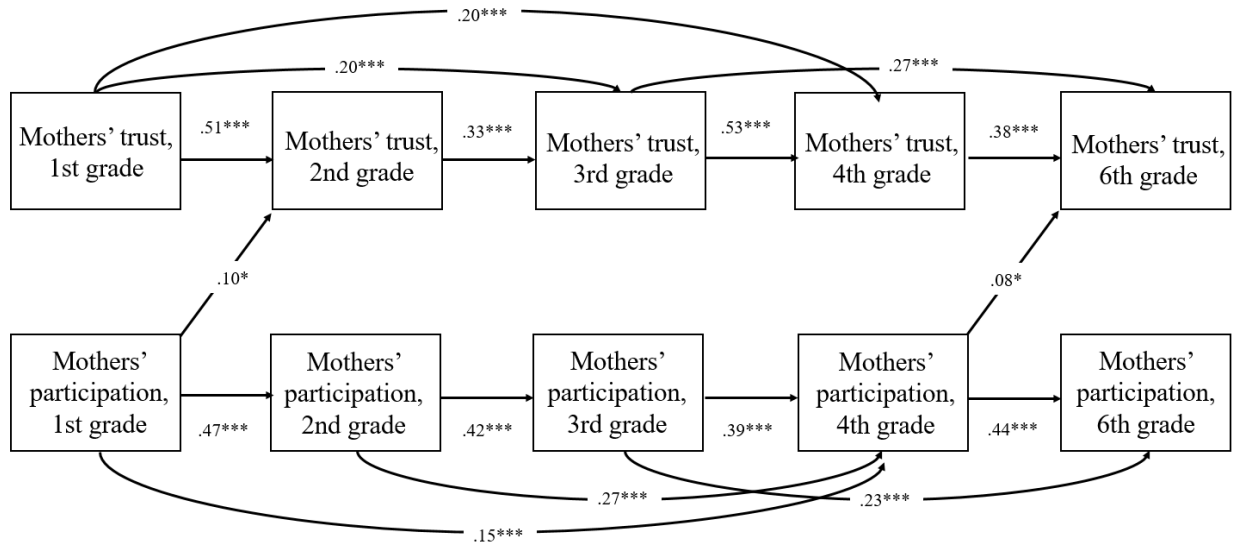


Figure 6 Cross-lagged path model: mothers' trust in their child's teacher and participation in parent meetings during primary school. Note: Standardized estimates. Only significant associations are shown.

Similarly, fathers' participation in parent meetings in first grade predicted their trust in their child's teacher in second grade (see Figure 7). As with trust and collaboration with teacher and other parents, participation in parent meetings was relatively stable for both mothers and fathers during their child's primary school years. The model fit the data well (Byrne, 2012) for both mothers [$\chi^2(16, n = 768) = 16.484, p = .420; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .006; SRMR = .016$] and fathers [$\chi^2(17, n = 422) = 26.123, p = .072; CFI = .992; RMSEA = .036; SRMR = .023$].

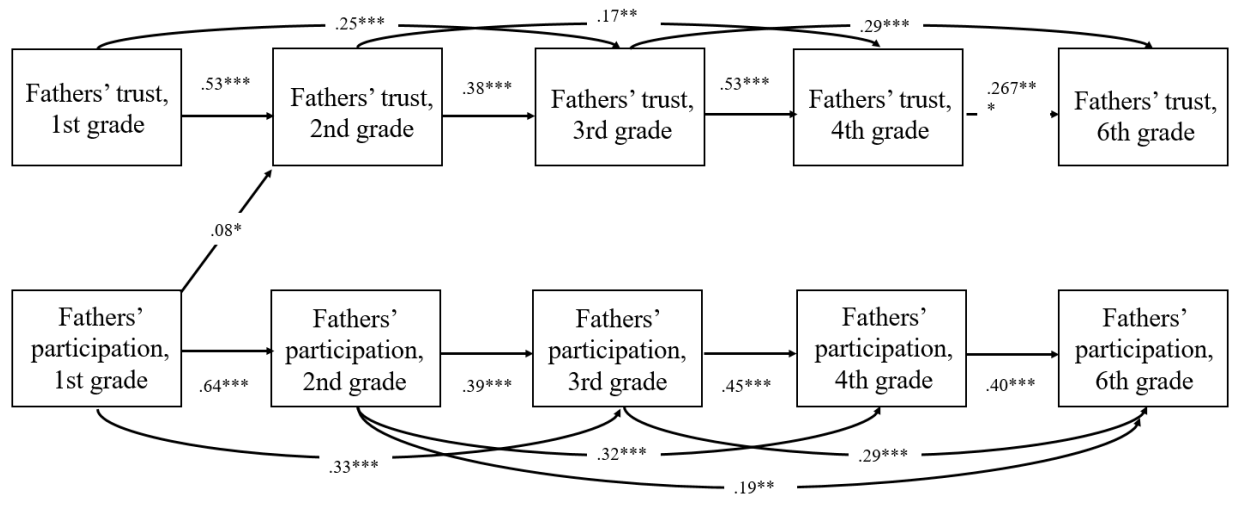


Figure 7 Cross-lagged path model: fathers' trust in their child's teacher and participation in parent meetings during primary school. Note: Standardized estimates. Only significant associations are shown.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine how parents' trust in their child's teacher predicts their school involvement and vice versa during their child's primary school years. Moreover, the aim was to study differences between mothers and fathers and between parents of boys and parents of girls in their trust in teacher and school involvement. The results demonstrate how parental trust and involvement change during primary school years and how trust and involvement are related to each other differently for mothers and fathers. The results suggest that parental trust in teacher and school involvement need to be supported differently for mothers and fathers.

Implications and Practices.

Results of the present study showed that in the Finnish school context parental trust in their child's teacher was high in general, even though mothers trusted their child's teacher more than fathers across grades one to four. As shown in previous research (Adams & Christenson,

2000; Kikas, Poikonen, et al., 2011) parents of boys and girls did not differ in their trust in teacher. Earlier studies have shown that parents trust more in teachers who use child-centered teaching practices (Kikas, Lerkkanen, Pakarinen, & Poikonen, 2016; Lerkkanen et al., 2013) and have high personal regard in their profession, students and students' parents (Chang, 2013). Thus, Finnish teachers' high educational level and the high respect for the teaching profession in Finnish society, as has been reported in PISA results (OECD, 2016), might at least partially explain high parent-teacher trust compared to many other countries. Moreover, Finnish teachers' emphasis on child-centered practices in the classroom (Tang et al., 2017) can strengthen parental trust.

Mothers and fathers in this sample reported rarely being in collaboration with teacher and other parents. While mothers participated in parental meetings often, fathers did so only sometimes. Mothers' involvement was higher in all grade levels in terms of both collaboration with teacher and other parents and participation in parent meetings, which indicates that fathers could perhaps benefit from both support for involvement and nontraditional ways of participating. According to Sormunen et al. (2011), discussions with teachers might be easier for mothers than for fathers, which could be one reason for their higher involvement. In Finnish schools, parents do not typically plan school activities together with teacher and for this reason, it is understandable that parents reported participating in parent meetings more than being in collaboration with teacher and other parents. It is important that teachers use language that is easily understandable to all parents and invite all parents to collaborate with them and to participate in parental meetings.

As in the case of trust, mothers of boys and mothers of girls did not differ in their amount of involvement. However, fathers of boys collaborated more with teachers and other parents than

fathers of girls did when their child was in fourth grade and participated more in parental meetings when their child was in second and in fourth grade. Fathers may be more concerned about their sons' schooling than about their daughters', or supporting their sons' education may be more natural to fathers, as they understand boys' schooling through their own school experiences. It is also possible that in some families parents have divided the involvement so that mothers take responsibility for daughters' schooling and fathers for their sons'. Regardless of the reason, it is important to find ways to support fathers of girls in their school involvement.

The associations between parents' trust in teacher and their collaboration with teacher and other parents were different for mothers and fathers during their child's primary school years. Mothers' collaboration with teacher and other parents predicted their subsequent trust in teacher. In contrast, fathers' trust in teacher predicted their subsequent collaboration with teacher and other parents. It is not surprising that trust and collaboration are associated, because earlier research has shown that communication is important in enhancing trust (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Angell, Stoner, & Shelden, 2009; Chang, 2013). Interestingly, the associations were different depending on the gender of the parent. Future research should focus on exploring concrete ways to support and encourage mothers in their collaboration with teacher and other parents, as it predicts their subsequent trust, whereas it would be beneficial to support fathers in their trust in teacher as it predicts their future collaboration with teacher and other parents.

For both mothers and fathers, participation in parent meetings in first grade predicted their trust in their child's teacher in second grade. The association between participation and trust was also statistically significant for mothers from fourth grade to sixth grade. For this reason, it is beneficial to encourage parents to participate in parental meetings, especially in first grade. According to Baker et al. (2016), parents suggest that schools could increase their involvement

by providing opportunities for involvement outside working hours and by arranging childcare for siblings. Parents also desire to be welcomed at their child's school, for instance, to visit the classroom during the school day, and to have a clear role in the school.

When schools are aiming at improving parents' trust in teachers or involvement in the school, interventions can be useful. Epstein and Dauber (1991) suggest the following steps when aiming at improving parental involvement: 1) identifying a starting point for parental involvement, 2) determining the aim of parental involvement, 3) deciding the responsibilities of each party in reaching the aim, 4) assessing the results, and 5) continuing the development of parental involvement. Interventions in enhancing parental involvement are especially effective if parents and teachers together pursue to improve communication and involvement (Cox, 2005; Epstein, 1995). Moreover, interventions targeted at improving the child's academic achievement, including parent tutoring in the home, have shown promising results (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005).

Limitations and Future Directions.

This study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the dropout in the sample from study phase one (grades 1 to 4) to study phase two (grade 6) limited the number of participants included in the cross-lagged path models examining associations between parental trust and involvement during primary school. Second, there were more mothers than fathers participating in the study, which might decrease the generalization of the results. Third, although the associations between parental trust and involvement were statistically significant, the associations were not very strong. For these reasons, more longitudinal research with larger sample sizes including both mothers and fathers is needed.

The present study showed that mothers and fathers differ in their trust and school involvement. Furthermore, fathers of boys and fathers of girls differ in their school involvement. Future research should examine the reasons behind the differences and find concrete ways for teachers and policy makers to support and encourage parents and teachers in building mutual trust and parental school involvement.

Summary of Key Points.

- Mothers trusted more in their child's teacher and were more active in their school involvement than fathers.
- Fathers of boys were more involved than fathers of girls in collaboration with teacher and other parents in fourth grade. Moreover, fathers of boys participated in parental meetings more in second and fourth grade than fathers of girls in these grades.
- Collaboration with teacher and other parents predicted mothers' subsequent trust in teacher whereas trust in teacher predicted fathers' subsequent collaboration.
- Both mothers' and fathers' participation in parent meetings in first grade predicted their trust in teachers later.

Reflective Questions for Readers.

- How can teachers encourage parents to collaborate with teachers and with other parents as well as to participate in parent meetings?
- How can teachers support mothers and fathers differently in their involvement?
- What kind of teacher can parents trust?
- As a parent, how am I collaborating with teacher and other parents and participating in parental meetings? Do I trust my child's teacher, and why?

Recommended Reading and Useful Links

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