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

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to examine the mediating role of trust in teachers in the relationship between school climate and school belonging among South African high school students.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive correlational research design was employed using a sample of 461 high school students from South Africa, selected based on the Morgan and Krejcie sample size table. Data were collected through three standardized questionnaires: the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale to measure school belonging, the Delaware School Climate Survey–Student (DSCS-S) for school climate, and the Trust in Schools Scale to assess trust in teachers. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficients, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were used for data analysis. The statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS-27 for initial correlations and AMOS-21 for model testing and mediation analysis.

Findings: Descriptive statistics indicated moderately high levels of school climate (M = 3.62, SD = 0.47), trust in teachers (M = 3.81, SD = 0.52), and school belonging (M = 3.74, SD = 0.49). Pearson correlation results showed that school climate was significantly correlated with trust in teachers (r = .59, p < .001) and school belonging (r = .52, p < .001), while trust in teachers was strongly correlated with school belonging (r = .66, p < .001). SEM results confirmed a good model fit (χ^2 = 124.37, df = 71, RMSEA = 0.041, CFI = 0.97), with trust in teachers significantly mediating the relationship between school climate and school belonging. The indirect effect of school climate on school belonging through trust in teachers was significant (β = .32, p < .001), supporting the proposed mediation model.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the critical role of trust in teachers in fostering students' sense of belonging in school, emphasizing the importance of nurturing a positive school climate to strengthen relational trust and emotional connectedness among students.

Keywords: School climate, trust in teachers, school belonging.

1. Introduction

The concept of school belonging has evolved over the past two decades as a central focus in educational psychology. It encompasses students' emotional connection to their school environment and their perception of being a respected and integral part of the school community. This construct is often linked to several beneficial outcomes, including increased academic engagement, lower dropout rates, and improved mental health. According to Ibrahim and Zaatari, positive student–teacher relationships are significantly associated with a heightened sense of school belonging among adolescents (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2019). Similarly, Arends and Visser found that students in South Africa who reported stronger interpersonal relationships with their teachers also demonstrated higher levels of academic achievement and school connectedness (Arends & Visser, 2019). These findings highlight that school belonging is not merely a reflection of student attitudes but is profoundly shaped by the quality of social interactions within the school context.

A central factor contributing to school belonging is school climate, a multidimensional construct that encompasses perceptions of safety, relationships, teaching and learning practices, and the institutional environment. A positive school climate is one in which students feel emotionally and physically secure, where respect and fairness are practiced, and where teachers and administrators create a supportive learning environment. Research by Canlı and Demirtaş showed that school principals' trust in teachers significantly influenced the overall school climate, suggesting a recursive relationship between institutional trust and environmental conditions (Canlı & Demirtaş, 2018). Furthermore, Bostancı and Bülbül identified organizational trust as a significant predictor of academic optimism among teachers, emphasizing that trustful environments promote constructive attitudes that resonate throughout the school community (Bostancı & Bülbül, 2019). In educational settings marked by mutual trust and respect, students are more likely to feel secure, engaged, and emotionally connected to the school.

Trust in teachers—defined as students' belief that their teachers are competent, reliable, caring, and fair—has emerged as a key interpersonal factor that mediates the impact of school climate on student outcomes. Trust is particularly important during adolescence, a period characterized by increased sensitivity to social dynamics and a desire for autonomy and respect. Platz argued that the relational dimension of trust between students and teachers plays a pivotal role in shaping the affective tone of the classroom, which in turn impacts students' motivation and belonging (Platz, 2021). Research by Brito et al. further emphasized that trust in teachers not only enhances school identification but also fosters stronger emotional bonds between students and the school environment (Brito et al., 2021). These findings underscore the notion that students' perception of their teachers as trustworthy figures may serve as a bridge between environmental cues and internal feelings of connection.

Recent empirical studies have begun to elucidate the complex interplay between school climate, trust in teachers, and school belonging using advanced statistical models. For instance, Atik et al. employed structural equation modeling to show that students' trust in their teachers partially mediated the relationship between school burnout and academic achievement, revealing the pivotal role of trust in moderating stress and promoting resilience (Atik et al., 2018). Similarly, Penonia and Quines demonstrated that trust mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and teacher self-efficacy, illustrating that trust operates as a fundamental mechanism in both student and teacher outcomes (Penonia & Quines, 2022). These studies indicate that trust is not merely an outcome of positive relationships but a mediating construct that links institutional and interpersonal dynamics to psychological and behavioral outcomes.

In addition to student perspectives, teacher and administrator behaviors also play a critical role in shaping trust and belonging. Keravnos and Symeou identified specific behaviors among highly trusted principals, such as transparency, fairness, and open communication, that contributed to a culture of trust within schools (Keravnos & Symeou, 2024). Similarly, Demir found that organizational trust positively influenced teacher leadership, suggesting that trust enhances not only student experiences but also teacher collaboration and empowerment (Demir, 2015). Weinstein et al. highlighted the importance of positional power and relational trust between principals and teachers, noting that trust can be either strengthened or weakened depending on leadership style and institutional transparency (Weinstein et al., 2018). These findings point to the systemic nature of trust and its broad implications for school culture.

The social-emotional climate of schools is further shaped by ethical and relational behaviors among staff. Ertürk found that ethical leadership among school principals was positively associated with teachers' perceptions of trust and

organizational commitment, suggesting that ethical governance creates an environment where trust can flourish (ErtÜRk, 2019). In a similar vein, ÖZdemİR and Gündüz examined the impact of favoritism in school management on organizational trust and commitment, finding that perceived unfairness in leadership practices undermines trust and diminishes school cohesion (ÖZdemİR & Gündüz, 2022). These institutional dynamics often trickle down to students, shaping their perceptions of fairness, respect, and emotional safety—core components of school belonging.

The psychological toll of poorly managed school environments is evident in burnout and disengagement, particularly among teachers. Wang identified emotional exhaustion and lack of institutional support as primary factors contributing to burnout in private universities in China, a context that shares several similarities with under-resourced schools globally (Wang, 2024). Kubat and Şentürk also explored organizational trust and awareness among physical education teachers, reinforcing the idea that institutional support and perceived integrity are essential for sustaining morale and engagement (Kubat & ŞEntÜRk, 2018). Although these studies primarily focus on educators, their implications extend to students, who often absorb the emotional climate established by teachers and administrators.

The importance of family-school relationships also cannot be overstated. Santiago et al. found that parent–teacher trust in elementary schools positively correlated with student outcomes, suggesting that trust operates across multiple dimensions and stakeholder groups (Santiago et al., 2016). Chui's study emphasized that collaborative practices among schools, families, and communities contributed to building trust at the institutional level, further reinforcing students' sense of security and belonging (Chui, 2023). These findings illustrate that trust is not a static attribute but a dynamic relational construct shaped by ongoing interactions and mutual understanding.

Moreover, school systems that prioritize voice and agency also tend to foster higher levels of trust and belonging. Black and Mayes discussed how the emotional politics of 'student voice' can enhance teachers' responsiveness and student engagement, creating an inclusive climate conducive to trust-building (Black & Mayes, 2020). In contrast, when students feel marginalized or excluded from decision-making processes, their sense of belonging diminishes. Bachman et al. proposed that even simple actions, such as teacher-initiated texting, could build trust and improve relationships, indicating that small

gestures can have a substantial emotional impact (Bachman et al., 2022).

Trust also functions as a protective factor against burnout and institutional stress. Maele and Houtte demonstrated that trust within schools acts as a buffer against teacher burnout, reinforcing the interdependent nature of school well-being (Maele & Houtte, 2015). In a similar study, Tahir et al. found that demographic variables influenced teachers' trust in principals in high-performing schools, implying that cultural and contextual factors shape trust dynamics in nuanced ways (Tahir et al., 2015). These insights highlight the importance of situating trust within broader socio-cultural frameworks, particularly in diverse educational contexts such as South Africa. While considerable research has examined the direct effects of school climate and trust on student outcomes, fewer studies have explored the mediating role of trust in the relationship between school climate and school belonging, particularly among high school students in the South African context. Given the country's historical and ongoing challenges with educational inequality, racial integration, and socio-economic disparity, understanding how institutional and relational factors interact to influence students' sense of school belonging is both timely and critical. The present study seeks to fill this gap by testing a mediational model in which trust in teachers serves as the intermediary variable linking perceived school climate to students' school belonging.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the mediating role of trust in teachers in the relationship between school climate and school belonging. The target population consisted of high school students in South Africa. Using the Morgan and Krejcie sample size determination table, a sample of 461 participants was selected to ensure adequate statistical power. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different schools and educational regions. All participants provided informed consent, and ethical guidelines were observed throughout the research process.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. School Belonging

The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale, developed by Carol Goodenow in 1993, is a widely used instrument designed to assess students' perceived sense of belonging and acceptance within the school environment. The scale consists of 18 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true), with higher scores indicating a stronger sense of school belonging. The scale includes both positively and negatively worded items and measures components such as feeling respected, valued, and included by peers and teachers. The PSSM has been validated across diverse student populations and educational contexts, demonstrating strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha typically above 0.80) and construct validity in numerous studies (Allen et al., 2022; Arslan & Coşkun, 2022; Tan et al., 2022).

2.2.2. School Climate

The Delaware School Climate Survey – Student version (DSCS-S), developed by the Delaware Positive Behavior Support Project at the University of Delaware (Bear et al., 2011), is a standardized tool for assessing students' perceptions of their school's climate. The DSCS-S includes 36 items across several subscales, including Teacher–Student Relations, Student Engagement, Discipline Structure, Safety, and Respect for Diversity. Responses are given on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting a more positive school climate. The survey has been used extensively in research and practice, with multiple studies confirming its reliability (Cronbach's alpha for subscales ranging from 0.78 to 0.92) and validity through factor analysis and correlations with relevant outcomes (Finch et al., 2023; Gilbertson, 2023; Milam et al., 2022).

2.2.3. Trust

Trust in teachers is measured using the Trust in Schools Scale developed by Bryk and Schneider (2002) as part of their broader work on relational trust within educational settings. This scale specifically examines students'

perceptions of teacher reliability, honesty, care, and respect. The instrument consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), capturing students' trust in the integrity and benevolence of their teachers. Although originally developed in a broader school trust framework, the student-specific version has been validated in later adaptations and studies, showing acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha typically above 0.80) and convergent validity in predicting student engagement and well-being (Brito et al., 2021; Chui, 2023; Penonia & Quines, 2022).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using both SPSS-27 and AMOS-21 software. Initially, descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics and main variables of the study. Pearson correlation analysis was employed to assess the bivariate relationships between school belonging (dependent variable) and the two independent variables: school climate and trust in teachers. To test the hypothesized mediating model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed using AMOS-21. Model fit indices, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Chi-square statistics, were used to evaluate the adequacy of the proposed model. All statistical tests were conducted at a significance level of $p < .05$.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 461 high school students from various schools in South Africa. Of the total participants, 252 students (54.66%) identified as female, while 209 students (45.34%) identified as male. In terms of age distribution, 119 students (25.81%) were 15 years old, 164 students (35.57%) were 16 years old, 103 students (22.34%) were 17 years old, and 75 students (16.27%) were 18 years old. Regarding grade level, 145 participants (31.45%) were in Grade 10, 178 participants (38.61%) were in Grade 11, and 138 participants (29.93%) were in Grade 12. The diversity in age and grade levels provided a balanced representation of adolescent high school students for the purposes of the current analysis.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
School Climate	3.62	0.47
Trust in Teachers	3.81	0.52
School Belonging	3.74	0.49

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 indicate that students reported moderately high perceptions across all three variables. The mean score for school climate was 3.62 (SD = 0.47), for trust in teachers was 3.81 (SD = 0.52), and for school belonging was 3.74 (SD = 0.49), all on a 5-point Likert scale. The relatively low standard deviations suggest limited variability in students' responses, indicating consistency in perceptions among the sample.

Before conducting the main statistical analyses, assumptions related to normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were assessed and met. Normality was evaluated using skewness and kurtosis values, which for all variables ranged between -0.87 and 0.91 for skewness and between -1.02 and 1.14 for kurtosis, falling within the acceptable range of ±2. Linearity and homoscedasticity were visually inspected through scatterplots of standardized residuals, revealing no evidence of deviation. Multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, all of which were below 2.10, indicating no concerns. Additionally, Mahalanobis distance values were examined to detect multivariate outliers, and no cases exceeded the critical value (χ^2 = 16.27, df = 3, p < .001). These results confirmed that the data met the statistical assumptions for both Pearson correlation and structural equation modeling.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Variables

Variables	1. School Climate	2. Trust in Teachers	3. School Belonging
1. School Climate	—		
2. Trust in Teachers	.59** (p < .001)	—	
3. School Belonging	.52** (p < .001)	.66** (p < .001)	—

As shown in Table 2, school climate had a significant positive correlation with trust in teachers (r = .59, p < .001) and school belonging (r = .52, p < .001). Trust in teachers was also strongly correlated with school belonging (r = .66, p < .001). These results support the hypothesized bivariate relationships and justify testing the mediation model using SEM.

Table 3

Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value
Chi-Square (χ^2)	124.37
df	71
χ^2/df	1.75
GFI	0.95
AGFI	0.92
CFI	0.97
RMSEA	0.041
TLI	0.96

The model fit indices presented in Table 3 indicate that the hypothesized mediation model had a good fit to the data. The chi-square value was 124.37 with 71 degrees of freedom, resulting in a χ^2/df ratio of 1.75, which is below the recommended cutoff of 3. The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI = 0.95), Adjusted GFI (AGFI = 0.92), Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.97), and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.96) all exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.90. The Root

Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.041) also indicated an acceptable fit (below 0.06), confirming the model's adequacy.

Table 4

*Standardized Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects in the Mediation Model*

Path	b	S.E.	Beta	p
School Climate → Trust	0.48	0.05	0.59	<.001
School Climate → Belonging	0.19	0.06	0.21	.002
Trust → School Belonging	0.43	0.04	0.55	<.001
School Climate → Belonging (Indirect)	0.21	0.03	0.32	<.001
School Climate → Belonging (Total)	0.40	0.05	0.53	<.001

Table 4 presents the direct, indirect, and total effects among the key variables in the structural model. School climate significantly predicted trust in teachers (b = 0.48, SE = 0.05, β = 0.59, p < .001) and had a direct effect on school belonging (b = 0.19, SE = 0.06, β = 0.21, p = .002). Trust in teachers also significantly predicted school belonging (b = 0.43, SE = 0.04, β = 0.55, p < .001). The indirect effect of school climate on school belonging through trust in teachers was significant (b = 0.21, SE = 0.03, β = 0.32, p < .001), resulting in a substantial total effect (b = 0.40, SE = 0.05, β = 0.53, p < .001). These results confirm the mediating role of trust in teachers.

Figure 1

Standardized Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects in the Structural Model
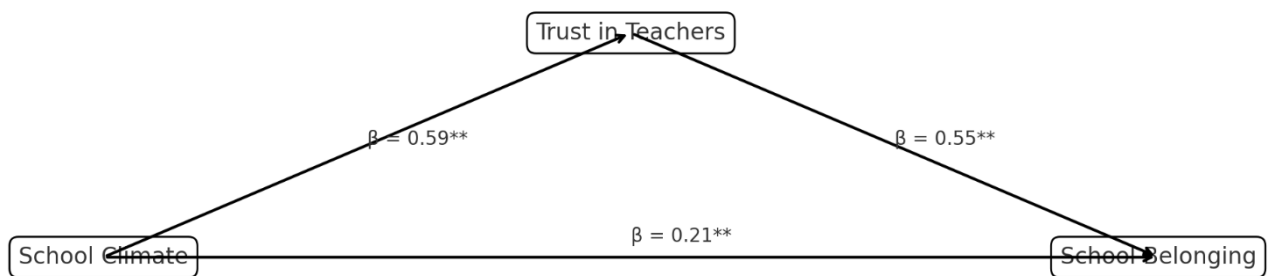
4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of trust in teachers in the relationship between school climate and school belonging among high school students in South Africa. Using a descriptive correlational design and structural equation modeling (SEM), the findings confirmed that school climate was positively correlated with both trust in teachers and school belonging. Moreover, trust in teachers significantly mediated the relationship between school climate and school belonging, indicating that students' perceptions of a supportive school environment enhance their trust in teachers, which in turn fosters a greater sense of belonging.

The results revealed a strong and direct relationship between school climate and students' sense of belonging.

This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the influence of school climate on emotional and social outcomes for students. A positive climate, characterized by safety, respect, teacher support, and inclusivity, helps students feel more connected and valued within the school community (Arends & Visser, 2019; Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2019). The findings echo the conclusions drawn by Canlı and Demirtaş, who argued that when school principals foster mutual trust and collaborative practices, they contribute to a climate in which students and teachers feel supported and emotionally secure (Canlı & Demirtaş, 2018). Similarly, Bostancı and Bülbül found that trust-enriched school environments promote optimistic and resilient attitudes, which likely extend to students' affective experiences (Bostancı & Bülbül, 2019).

Importantly, the study demonstrated that trust in teachers serves as a significant mediator in the pathway between school climate and school belonging. This confirms the proposition that relational trust is a key psychological mechanism translating institutional-level characteristics into student-level outcomes. Students who perceive their school as fair, inclusive, and emotionally safe are more likely to view their teachers as trustworthy, caring, and reliable. In turn, this relational trust promotes stronger emotional ties to the school. This interpretation is supported by Platz, who emphasized that teacher-student trust creates a relational environment where students feel safe to participate, share, and grow (Platz, 2021). Brito et al. also found that student-teacher trust was a central factor in school identification, reinforcing the notion that trust helps build meaningful psychological bonds between students and their schools (Brito et al., 2021).

These findings resonate with the work of Atik et al., who, using structural equation modeling, identified trust as a mediating variable between student burnout and achievement, highlighting how relational dynamics influence both psychological and academic outcomes (Atik et al., 2018). Similarly, Penonia and Quines found that teacher trust mediated the impact of leadership behaviors on teacher efficacy, illustrating that trust plays a central role in shaping institutional well-being and personal competence (Penonia & Quines, 2022). These studies, along with the present research, point to trust as a dynamic interpersonal process that fosters emotional stability, engagement, and identification within educational contexts.

Further, the study's results support research emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between school leadership and trust. Keravnos and Symeou identified behaviors among trusted principals, such as openness, responsiveness, and ethical leadership, as central to creating a trust-rich school environment (Keravnos & Symeou, 2024). These behaviors indirectly support students' trust in teachers by shaping a broader institutional culture of care and accountability. Similarly, Demir's findings underscored the influence of organizational trust on teacher leadership, suggesting that environments where trust is cultivated lead to more empowered, connected, and motivated educators (Demir, 2015)—conditions that trickle down to student experiences.

The relational aspects of trust are deeply embedded in ethical and equitable school practices. The current findings are consistent with those of Ertürk, who demonstrated that ethical leadership practices positively influenced teachers' trust and organizational commitment (ErtÜRk, 2019).

Likewise, ÖZdemİR and Gündüz showed that perceived favoritism and inequity in school leadership diminished organizational trust and morale, weakening the institutional framework needed for student emotional security (ÖZdemİR & Gündüz, 2022). Therefore, it is plausible to infer that students' trust in teachers is not only a function of personal interactions but is also shaped by systemic and institutional behaviors that promote or undermine ethical governance.

Burnout and disengagement, common in stressful school environments, are also indirectly affected by trust. Wang found that lack of institutional support and poor relational dynamics were major contributors to burnout among young teachers in China, a finding that parallels dynamics in under-resourced educational systems worldwide (Wang, 2024). Kubat and Şentürk also emphasized that teachers' awareness and trust levels influenced their perception of the school's organizational structure and emotional tone (Kubat & ŞEntÜRk, 2018). Given that teacher well-being often shapes classroom climate, and students are sensitive to teachers' emotional states, it is likely that environments low in trust may foster alienation, thereby reducing students' sense of belonging.

Parent–school relations also offer additional explanatory power. Chui's research emphasized the role of home-school-community collaboration in strengthening trust among elementary school students, which helped to build a positive school climate conducive to trust and belonging (Chui, 2023). Similarly, Santiago et al. found that trust between parents and teachers had direct implications for student behavior and emotional outcomes, reinforcing the systemic nature of trust across different educational relationships (Santiago et al., 2016). These studies highlight that fostering trust should be viewed as a collective process involving all stakeholders in the educational ecosystem.

Voice and agency, especially for students, also play a role in developing trust and a sense of inclusion. Black and Mayes discussed the emotional and political dimensions of student voice, showing that when students feel heard, their emotional engagement with school improves (Black & Mayes, 2020). In this sense, trust is not only built through care and respect but also through empowering students as active contributors to their school community. Bachman et al. illustrated this through practical examples, noting that even brief, personal communication from teachers—such as text messaging—can enhance relational trust and emotional support (Bachman et al., 2022).

Finally, trust can act as a protective mechanism against stress and emotional exhaustion for both students and

educators. Maele and Houtte demonstrated that trust within school communities can mitigate teacher burnout, reinforcing the cyclical and reinforcing nature of relational trust (Maele & Houtte, 2015). Tahir et al. further emphasized that demographic factors such as age, gender, and professional experience influence the development of trust, which may have implications for how trust-building interventions are designed in diverse school environments (Tahir et al., 2015). These findings align with the current study's results, suggesting that relational and contextual factors are key to understanding how institutional practices translate into emotional experiences of belonging.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite the robustness of the findings, this study is not without limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality between school climate, trust in teachers, and school belonging. Longitudinal studies would be more appropriate to determine the directionality and stability of these relationships over time. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases such as social desirability and subjective perception. Third, the study was conducted in South Africa, a country with unique historical and social dynamics, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Additionally, although SEM provides a strong statistical framework for testing mediation, unmeasured variables or contextual influences could still play a role in the relationships examined.

Future studies should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to more definitively establish causal relationships between school climate, trust, and belonging. Researchers may also consider using mixed-methods approaches to gain deeper insights into how students experience trust in real time. Including perspectives from teachers, administrators, and parents would enhance the ecological validity of future models and provide a more holistic understanding of school belonging. Comparative studies across different cultural and national contexts would be valuable to explore how socio-political factors mediate these dynamics. Moreover, further research could investigate how digital communication and technology influence trust-building in increasingly hybrid learning environments.

To foster school belonging, educational leaders should prioritize creating a supportive and inclusive school climate where fairness, safety, and emotional support are evident in daily practice. Building trust must be an intentional process involving consistent teacher behavior, transparent communication, and genuine student engagement. Professional development for teachers should include relational training focused on empathy, responsiveness, and equity. Administrators should lead by example in modeling ethical leadership and cultivating a culture of mutual respect and trust. Schools may also benefit from implementing feedback systems that allow students to voice their concerns and experiences, ensuring that trust is continuously nurtured across all levels of the educational environment.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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