

# A Mixed Methods Examination of Youth in Foster Care's Trust in Social Institutions

Exceptional Children

1-16

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ecx](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ecx)**Wendy Cavendish<sup>1</sup> , Deborah Perez<sup>2</sup> , and Kele Stewart<sup>3</sup>**

## Abstract

Youth in foster care interact at the intersection of multiple systems. Experiences and relationships within each system may facilitate or hinder youths' trust. Importantly, trust has been identified as a potential contributor to improved school and life outcomes for youth in foster care. This explanatory sequential mixed methods study used surveys and focus groups to examine levels of trust and barriers or facilitators to the development of trust across systems for high school foster youth with and without disabilities. Rasch model item statistics revealed low levels of trust in the legal system (foster care system, courts, and police) and relatively low levels of trust in the education system. Youth reported high levels of trust in family and friends within their social networks. Black male youth with disabilities reported the lowest levels of trust overall. Focus groups with youth revealed experiences that created barriers to trust, such as school, foster care system, and court personnel being dishonest, not allowing youth to engage in decision-making, and unfair treatment. Interactions that facilitated trust included demonstrating care, advocating for youth, and being a consistent presence. Implications for practice and future research are provided.

## Keywords

mixed methods, foster care, relationships, trust

Of the over 500,000 youth served by the foster care system in the United States, only half graduate from high school (Font & Gershoff, 2020; Thompson et al., 2025; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2023). Additionally, up to 50% of children in foster care receive special education services (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Youth with disabilities in foster care also report lower academic performance and poorer transition outcomes than youth without disabilities in foster care (Canha et al., 2024; Palmer et al., 2022).

Research with youth in foster care consistently identifies strong social networks and trusting, caring relationships as related to

improved outcomes, including high school graduation (e.g., Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Skobba et al., 2018). However, recent research has identified challenges related to the development of trusting relationships for

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youth in foster care. Heyman et al.'s (2020) study identified youths' feelings of powerlessness and a lack of trust in relationships with adults as well as limited trust in the overall foster care system. In addition, youth have noted "stigma" associated with being served in foster care and have reported having an expectation of harm based on past experiences that leads to trust challenges (Eldridge et al., 2020). These challenges of trust are often magnified by racial, socioeconomic, and educational disparities. Negative social contextual interactions with other racialized systems such as the education and legal/court systems disparately exacerbate issues of trust (Font & Gershoff, 2020; Scott et al., 2011).

### *Importance of Trust*

Research has demonstrated a relationship between trust and well-being across the lifespan (e.g., Glatz & Eder, 2020). However, recent research has suggested that this relationship may be especially strong for vulnerable adolescents. Bi et al. (2025) conducted a large-scale, multilevel meta-analysis examining the association between trust and subjective well-being and found that across studies with over 2 million participants, based on 991 effect sizes, interpersonal trust, generalized trust, and institutional trust were associated with subjective well-being. Of note, Bi et al. (2025) reported that the association between trust and well-being among children/adolescents is critical, with trust playing a crucial role in forming and maintaining supportive social relationships.

Heyman et al. (2020) found the concept of trust to be essential for developing support for the transition and independence of youth in foster care. They not only noted that most youth in foster care reported a lack of trust in adult relationships but also reported the importance of building trusting peer and adult relationships within the foster care system as the "foundation for adolescents in developing critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and a healthy self-esteem" (p. 5).

**Trust in Systems.** Recent research has begun to examine the relationships of youth in foster

care with system personnel including volunteer advocates. Thompson et al. (2025) reported that prior negative experiences in the complex child welfare system influence youths' trust and, thus, honesty and open communication by court actors and advocates over time are necessary to build reciprocally trusting relationships. Saarnik et al. (2023) interviewed 31 youth in foster care about their experiences in the home removal process, and most reported feeling excluded from the decision-making process. Of note, the youth shared that their case managers did not involve them in the placement decisions and that "there was no trustworthy adult to talk to" about the process (Saarnik et al., 2023, p. 4). The criticality of youth involvement in foster care hearings and placement decisions, particularly as related to the perceived fairness of the process and resultant trust in the court process, has been reported in prior research (Weisz et al., 2011).

Also of note, living/home instability (placement changes) in foster care occurs more often in adolescence and for youth receiving special education services under the label emotional behavior disorder (Maguire et al., 2024). Research has shown that these home changes contribute to a breakdown in trust for youth in foster care (Ben-Shlomo et al., 2025). A recent report in Texas highlighted the critical role of permanency in placement and developing positive relationships with caregivers, and that limited trust with caregivers was related to increased stress and anger and reduced well-being of youth (Ball et al., 2023).

Negative experiences with agencies and institutions exacerbate issues of trust, and specifically, negative social contextual experiences are related to low satisfaction with child welfare services as well as mistrust of mental health professionals (Scott et al., 2011). The impact of negative experiences has also been extensively reported related to youths' experiences with the legal system, particularly for Black students and police. For example, Evans et al. (2022) reported that Black youth report the lowest level of trust in the police, compared with every other ethnic group and Black adults.

The role of trust is also important in school settings with "trust emerging as the most

important facilitator” in students’ willingness to ask for help from school social work services (Pffiffer et al., 2023, p. 5). In addition, recent research has examined the importance of trust in schools as related to improved outcomes for youth. Students’ trust in teachers has been linked to decreased dropout risk and increased school belonging (Fenizia & Parrello, 2025) and increased engagement and well-being (Holzer & Daumiller, 2025). The limited research with students with disabilities examining trust in school has also supported the importance of trust. Zolkowska and Kaliszewska (2021) probed students with disabilities’ views of the social interactions and patterns within school that contributed to the development of trust, and they identified the examples of honesty and responsibility as critical to student–school trust.

### *Purpose and Framework*

Youth in foster care interact at the intersection of multiple systems (child welfare, education, and legal systems), and experiences and relationships within each system may facilitate or hinder youths’ trust and thus influence their trajectories toward successful transition (Cavendish et al., 2024; Stewart & Cavendish, 2021). As trusting relationships are related to improved transition outcomes for youth in foster care (e.g., Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014), our overarching purpose was to identify the level of trust and to center youth voices related to facilitators or obstacles to the development of trust in social institutions/systems (family, school, courts/legal system) for high school youth with and without disabilities in foster care. In this study, we focus on particularized trust—trust that is relational in nature. Heimer (2001) suggests that particularized trust is developed and managed relative to the stake in social interactions that people have. Heimer notes that to “trust means to accept the hypothesis that another actor (person, group, organization) will follow ethical rules about such matters as truth-telling and avoiding harm to others” (p. 44). Youth with much at stake in interactions (such as youth in foster care and youth with disabilities) may manage their “uncertainty and vulnerability” in these interactions with system

representatives (courts/legal system and schools if sites of previous difficulty) by decreasing trust in the systems.

### *Rationale and Research Questions*

As noted by Leko et al. (2023), “methodological transparency is particularly salient” in mixed methods research design (p.7). Thus, we outline our transformative paradigmatic stance based on our axiological (values), ontological (nature of reality), and epistemological (what constitutes knowledge) beliefs that framed our mixed methods design. The transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2012), in contrast to positivism, holds that social phenomena should be addressed through the subjectivity of social actors. As researchers drawing from the transformative paradigm, we affirm that our research is not ideologically neutral because its goal is to increase equity and social justice (Mertens, 2012). We understand that the world is shaped by power relationships within historical, social, political, cultural, and economic conditions (Mertens, 2012). Our positionality is shaped by our experience as women (one White, one Latinx, and one Black) and as legal and community advocates and educators working with youth and families in the intersecting contexts of special education, community programs and advocacy, and legal settings.

We also recognize that ontologically, multiple realities are socially constructed, and we acknowledge the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, racial, gender, and dis/ability values that define the realities of our research partners/participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2012). In terms of epistemology, as transformative scholars, we adhere to the notion that the way of acquiring knowledge is both transactional and subjectivist (Crotty, 2003). We believe that the dialogic and dialectical nature of mixed methods allows us as researchers to challenge some of the social injustices experienced within intersecting systems by multiply marginalized students. Mertens (2007) noted that “mixed methods within the transformative paradigm are crucial to obtaining an understanding of reality as it is experienced in culturally complex communities” (p. 224). This approach provides the potential to see beyond current

boundaries of thought and radically rethink how we engage with intersectional diversity (Cavendish et al., 2020). Thus, our research, as informed by this framework, aims to critique and to transform, not to achieve neutrality or objectivity, but to challenge injustice (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Mertens, 2021). The research questions that guided this study include the following:

1. Quantitative Research Question: What is the level of trust in social institutions of youth in foster care for those receiving and not receiving special education services? What differences exist across demographic groups?
2. Qualitative Research Question: How is trust developed or thwarted across contexts?
3. Mixed Methods Question: What are the facilitators or barriers to trust development in the contexts/social institutions with the highest and lowest trust levels?

## Method

Our research design was informed by quality components of mixed methods research in special education outlined by Leko et al. (2023) and the mixed methods design core quality indicators by Hirose and Creswell (2023). The core quality criteria developed from these sources that are adhered to in our study are as follows:

1. Provision of a rationale for the use of mixed methods methodology
2. Written quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods questions/aims
3. Identification of the type of mixed methods design and presented within a diagram/figure
4. Reporting the quantitative and qualitative data separately
5. Data integration provided in a joint display (adapted from Hirose & Creswell, 2023, pp. 15–16).

We used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to examine youth in foster care levels

of trust. In the quantitative phase, we collected youth responses to a Trust Survey. In the qualitative phase, we developed interview questions based on responses to the Trust Survey and held focus groups with youth to learn about their experiences that developed or thwarted trust in school, family, and legal/court systems. In the final phase, we integrated the quantitative and qualitative data. A diagram of the phases of our study is outlined in Figure 1.

## Participants

Participants in the quantitative phase included 53 high school youth in foster care who participated in a multiyear transition support program at a university that provides programming to support high school completion and transition preparedness. The program consists of monthly sessions during the academic year and a 3-week summer residency on the university campus. Informed consent procedures included obtaining parent/guardian consent from all youth participants' guardians. Youth assent procedures were conducted by a member of the research team. The three research team members participated in the program orientation when the youth joined the program and were known to the youth. The research team members provided an overview of the project and a review of risks/benefits, confidentiality protocols, and a voluntary basis for participation. The demographics of the 53 youth as reported in their program enrollment and school records were 46% male, 54% female, 72% Black (includes African-American and Haitian-American designations on paperwork), and 28% Latinx (White Hispanic designation on paperwork). Regarding school services received, 52% of youth did not receive special education services, and 35% received special education services based on individual education programs (IEPs) or 504 plans. This proportion of students receiving special education services is roughly equivalent to the national estimates of youth in foster with disabilities (approximately 40%) (Powers et al., 2018). All student participants were on a standard diploma track and participated in primarily general education settings, including students receiving special education support services. There were missing school data for seven youth.

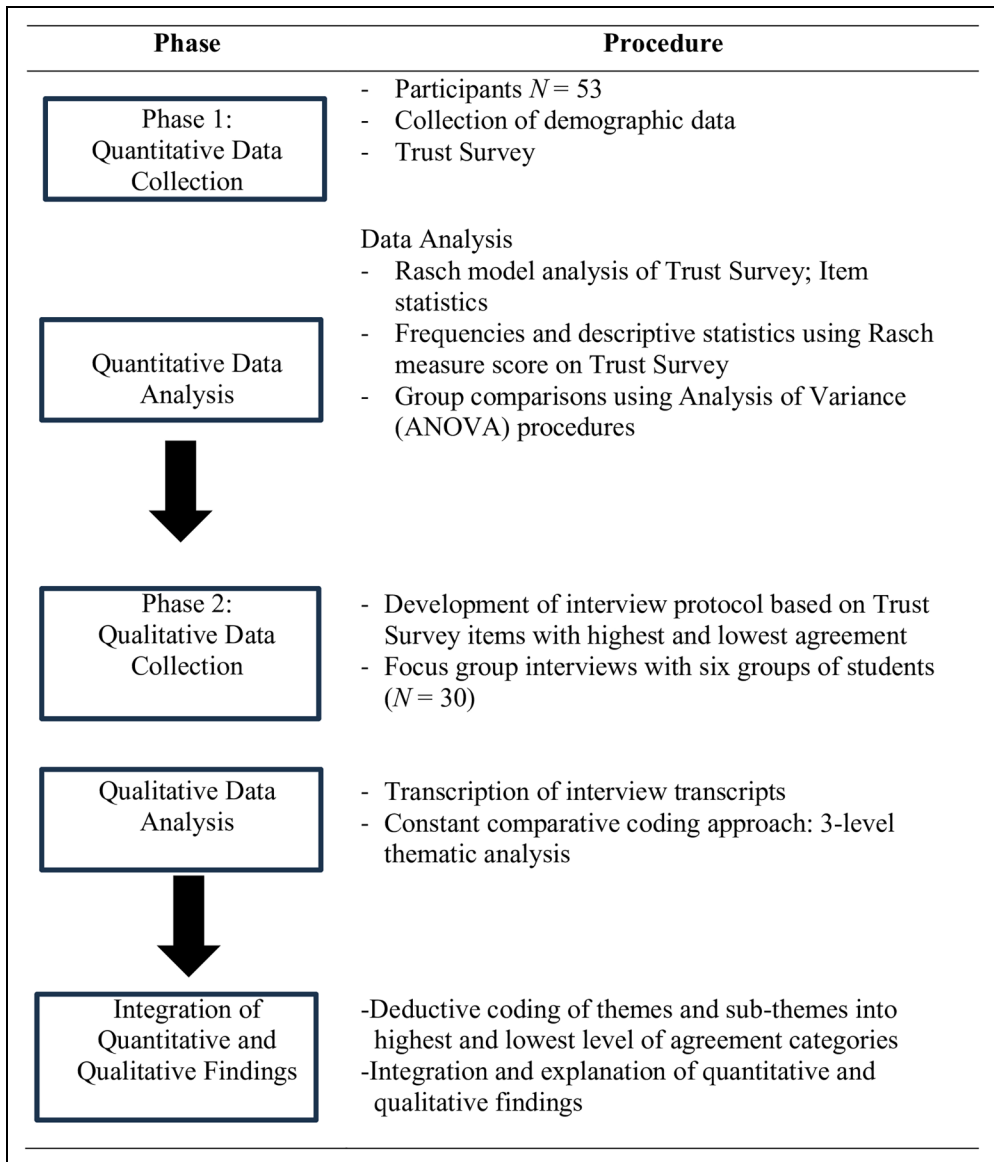


**Figure 1.** Model of sequential explanatory mixed methods design.

Source: adapted from Henderson and Green (2014).

Thirty of the youth who completed the quantitative *Trust Survey* also participated in the qualitative focus groups. These youth were selected from across all quartiles of trust levels reported. Ten youth within each quartile were invited to participate, and we over-sampled within each quartile to ensure representation of youth served in special education. Thirty youth agreed to participate

in the focus groups. These youth are relatively representative of the larger sample demographics: 57% female; 56% Black, 44% Latinx; and 46% receiving special education services.

### *Quantitative Data Sources and Analyses*

*Trust Survey.* We drew from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

measurement of social capital project item bank to build the Trust Survey (ESS, 2013). The item bank is focused on the judgments people make about the quality of their social networks, for example, the extent to which they judge them to be fair and how much social institutions are trusted or not. We identified and adapted 20 items from the Trust domain items of the social capital survey. The items are scaled on a six-level Likert scale that ranges from very strongly disagree to very strongly agree. Across the item response categories, scores of 1.00–2.99 indicate a lack of agreement/lack of trust, and scores of 3.00–6.00 represent agreement/level of trust. Examples of Trust Survey items include “I personally trust my school” and “The courts make fair, impartial decisions based on the evidence made available to them.”

**Rasch Model Analysis.** Rasch analysis is a psychometric technique developed to improve the precision of instrument construction (Boone, 2016). In this study, we used the Rasch rating scale model to determine the unidimensionality of the Trust Survey measure (Bond & Fox, 2007). The Rasch model was run using jMetrik software that performed a logarithmic transformation on the item and person data. This process converts nonlinear raw data to a linear scale (Boone, 2016). As the Trust Survey includes a Likert rating scale, the raw score data cannot be considered as equidistant between response categories (e.g., between the ratings of strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree), and the Rasch analysis allowed us to obtain Rasch measure scores (essentially scores that are converted to equal adjacent response categories across the survey instrument).

The Rasch model analysis was also used to obtain difficulty statistics for each item and measure score for each person in the sample and to determine the reliability of scores across persons and items. We used the Rasch measure scores in all analyses (Bond & Fox, 2007). We further obtained item statistics from the Rasch model analysis to identify Trust items with the highest and lowest levels of agreement by youth (trust in social domains—family, school, and courts/legal system).

### *Descriptive Statistics and Group Comparisons.*

We examined the mean scores and standard deviations of the Rasch measure scores on the Trust Survey. Next, we used univariate analysis of variance procedures (ANOVA) to examine differences in the Trust Survey Rasch measure scores across the categorical variables of school services received (received special education support services via an IEP or 504 plan or did not receive special education as did not have an IEP or 504 plan), race/ethnicity (Black or Latinx), and gender (male/female). Data were normally distributed, and the assumptions for a standard parametric ANOVA were satisfied. Finally, we conducted a post hoc analysis using Tukey’s HSD procedure to determine if there were interaction effects between the grouping variables.

### *Qualitative Data Sources and Analysis*

Four focus groups ( $N=30$  youth; 6–8 youth within each focus group) were conducted by the research team using a semistructured interview guide to explore youth perspectives on trust across various systems. The interview guide was developed from the *Trust Survey* responses. We identified and adapted 12 items from the 20-item survey to elicit responses related to the perspectives of trust in social institutions and the person and/or processes that facilitated or thwarted trust development. Examples of interview guide questions include “Who are the people that you trust at your school? What do the people you trust do or say that makes you trust them?” The focus group transcripts were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis included qualitative coding of all interview transcripts using a constant comparative approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The coding was conducted by two research team members to ensure coding reliability throughout the process. Using the process suggested by Charmaz (2006), the coding process moved from concrete to more abstract levels. We used a three-tiered constant comparative process that included (a) assignment of individual codes to chunks of data that carried discrete meaning; (b) grouping of these codes into “family” codes; and then (c) statements of

thematic category convergence across participants. Member checks were conducted with representative participants to ensure coding adherence to the intended meaning of participants.

### **Data Integration Procedures**

Data integration procedures occurred during the data interpretation and inference stage of the analytic process (Leko et al., 2023). In this final analytic phase of the study, we deductively sorted the thematic categories reported by youth into domains of the Trust Survey: trust in school, trust in the legal system, and social network supports. We then cross-walked the grouped categories with supporting in vivo quotes with the items with the highest and lowest levels of agreement based on the Rasch item statistics for integration and interpretation. The integrated data were then assembled in a joint display. We followed the joint display recommendations by Guetterman et al. (2021): (1) The visual joint display is self-explanatory; (2) the visual joint display avoids unnecessary complexity and prioritizes clear communication of integrated findings; (3) the visual joint display improves the clarity of reporting the integration process and the outcomes as compared to a nonvisual display; and (4) the main text of the article describes the content of the visual joint display and how to interpret it (p. 7).

## **Findings**

### **Quantitative Trust Score Means**

The Rasch measure score (the logarithmic transformation of the raw scores) means and standard deviations on the Trust Survey are reported in Table 1. A lower score indicates lower levels of trust. The Rasch measure score means reported were lower for males and students receiving special education services and slightly lower for Black students.

However, there were no statistically significant group differences (no main effects of grouping variables) on the Trust scores ( $F(1,44) = .152, p = .69$ ;  $F(1,44) = .312, p = .58$ ;  $F(1,44) = 3.22, p = .08$ , respectively).

There were also no two-way interaction effects. However, we found a statistically significant three-way interaction between receiving special education services\*race/ethnicity\*gender on youth Trust scores ( $F(1,44) = 5.29, p = .03$ ). Thus, there is a statistically significant difference representing a lower level of trust for Black males receiving special education services.

### **Scale Quality and Item Statistics of Trust Survey**

The reliability for the Trust Survey was examined via the Rasch model analysis. The Trust Survey scale item reliability was .93 (analogous to Cronbach's alpha), and the reliability estimate for persons in this sample was .79. The separation index was 3.67; a separation index value greater than 3 is considered good (Fisher, 2007). The Rasch item difficulty scores (representing the level of agreement with each item on the scale) ranged from  $-.76$  to  $.66$  (raw score means of 1.8–4.1 on the six-level Likert scale), which reveals a wide range of agreement across items in the Trust Survey scale. Scores below 3.0 indicate a lack of trust, and scores 3.0 or higher indicate increasing levels of trust. For ease in interpretation, we report the raw score means and standard deviations in aggregate by domain in Table 2.

The social network items with the highest level of agreement by youth were related to the importance of family and friends (example item: "My family is important in my life"), with a mean domain score of 3.58. This represents a relatively high level of trust in social network persons (over 3.0 on the Likert scale represents agreement with items). Items related to generalized trust (example item: "Most people can be trusted") revealed a general lack of trust by the youth with a mean domain score of 2.38. Items within domains related to particularized trust in systems included school and the legal system. Trust in school (example item: "I personally trust my school") domain score of 2.69 represents a somewhat low level of trust. However, youth responses within this domain were somewhat variable as these

**Table 1.** Rasch Scores on the Trust Survey.

| Group                     | N  | Mean Score (SD) |
|---------------------------|----|-----------------|
| Gender                    |    |                 |
| Male                      | 25 | 0.929 (.78)     |
| Female                    | 28 | 1.363 (1.12)    |
| Race                      |    |                 |
| Black                     | 39 | 1.164 (.89)     |
| Latinx                    | 14 | 1.171 (1.39)    |
| School services received* |    |                 |
| Special education         | 19 | 1.103 (.67)     |
| General education         | 27 | 1.226 (1.18)    |

Note. \*Missing school data for seven youth.

domain items also included the highest standard deviation (1.26). Trust in legal systems (example item: “The courts make fair, impartial decisions based on the evidence made available to them”) revealed a complete lack of trust by youth, as represented by the domain mean score of 1.96.

### Qualitative Findings

The three-level coding process resulted in 69 open codes, 9 family codes, and 3 thematic category codes. The three thematic categories and related family codes that emerged were as follows: (1) Unfair Treatment Across Various Systems (family codes: discrimination by law enforcement, unfair legal system experience, support and challenges within foster care system; (2) Trust in School Environments (family codes: variable teacher trustworthiness, variable peer trustworthiness; inconsistent rules/procedures); and (3) Supportive Social Networks (family codes: peer supports, sibling relationships, and parent/guardian support).

**Thematic Category 1: Unfair Treatment Across Various Systems.** The youth expressed various experiences with the foster care system that ranged from a few youth feeling supported to many of the youth reporting feeling like “a number” within the system. For example, one youth noted a lack of rapport with their case manager, who they felt wasn’t interested in their experiences but instead stated, “It’s their job so they doing it.” Another youth described their beliefs about the foster care system as, “I already lost trust in them like six years ago.” Some of the specific

**Table 2.** Mean Trust Survey Scores Across Domains.

|                                   | Number of Items | Difficulty Mean (SD) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Generalized trust items           | 6               | 2.38 (1.19)          |
| School trust items                | 3               | 2.69 (1.26)          |
| Trust in legal institutions items | 3               | 1.96 (1.22)          |
| Trust in social networks          | 8               | 3.56 (1.23)          |

foster system challenges they noted were related to experiences with foster parents and group home managers, where some youth reported not feeling trusted or respected in the foster homes. For example, one female described being accused in her foster placement, “She accused me of sleeping with her grandchildren, and they were like way older than me at this time too.” Another youth recalled that in her placement she was “accused of going in her [foster parent’s] room at night and cutting her hair.”

Almost all of the youth expressed a deep distrust of the legal system, courts, and especially the police. Although some youth reported feeling supported by the guardian ad litem [A guardian ad litem is a certified volunteer appointed by the court to represent the best interests of a child in a court proceeding] in the court setting, other youth reported not having their voices heard. One youth shared, “I kept telling the court like that I wanted to stay with my foster parents, [but] they kept trying to put me with my dad, and he was abusing me...” Another youth expressed racial discrimination as a significant concern, stating, “One person gets sentenced to this [amount of] time, and another person can get sentenced to another...[based on] the color of their skin.”

The youth reported racial discrimination as central to most of their interactions with the police, noting that they “target minorities.” One youth described a traffic stop involving multiple police cars on the scene and suggested the increased police cars for a headlight outage were related to the race of the youth in the car. The youth noted:

I feel like if it was different, if [my friend, the driver] didn’t have a tattoo and he didn’t look the

way he did... 'cause I was confused on why they had to bring up more cops especially when it was kids, you know? They brought a bunch of cars and yeah ... overkill.

Overall, the sentiment expressed related to the youths' trust in interactions with the police was negative. For example, one youth noted that police were "drunk with power." This negative perception was true whether in personal interactions or based on what they witnessed related to family members with one youth noting she witnessed her pregnant mother being arrested and the police who "sprayed her and they bruised her, and handcuffed her and choked her, and threw her on the ground...."

**Thematic Category 2: Trust in School Environments.** The level of trust in school environments expressed by youth was varied. Some of the youth identified trustworthy individuals such as supportive teachers who have "open door" policies where youth feel they can talk to them "about anything," including their "life stories." One student specified that evidence of caring helped to build trust, as one student mentioned, "I kind of trust my teachers. My perfect teacher is Ms. A...she wanted to know me." A student receiving special education services mentioned the school trust counselor as being supportive and who "if I'm struggling, she'll go and talk to the teacher for me."

However, several youth expressed limited trust in their schools. Many students shared negative interactions related to "favoritism" and "dishonesty" among teachers and peers. One student noted, "[Teachers] gossip about students. Students gossip about students. So there really isn't anyone you can trust." Additionally, contributing to the general lack of trust, some of the youth perceived unfair treatment by teachers and insincere administrators who were deemed "fake." For example, one youth indicated that school personnel "say one thing, but then they mean another, or they do something else."

**Thematic Category 3: Supportive Social Networks.** In addition to the several youth who identified supportive teachers or

counselors in school environments, all of the youth reported the importance of relationships with family and friends and spoke about how those relationships provided a network of encouragement and assistance. This support was crucial in helping them navigate the trust issues and challenges with school and legal systems. For example, one youth specified that "if you're struggling with something [and] you need help," her friends were always there for her.

Youth described family members, particularly siblings and parents, as playing a crucial role in providing emotional and practical support. Regardless of living/home placements, many youth mentioned their siblings, uncles, aunties, and biological parents as being worthy of trust and providing support. As one youth noted, "You only have one mom really." Another youth mentioned that her parents "support me when I'm at all my school activities. They come to my dance competitions, cheer me on." Several youth also noted the importance of support provided by their siblings, particularly older siblings who "because they're already in college" can "help [the youth] understand what it's like."

### *Data Integration and Joint Display Results*

The linkage between the quantitative results (Trust Survey means) and the qualitative findings (thematic categories and representative in vivo quotes) is mapped in the joint display (see Figure 2). The Trust Survey items with the lowest agreement converged with the thematic categories of Unfair Treatment Across Systems and Trust in School Environments. The Trust Survey items with the highest agreement converged with the thematic category of Supportive Social Networks. The Trust Survey items with the lowest agreement represent raw mean scores below 2.25, and the highest represent items with scores above 3.5. We report raw mean scores in the joint display for ease of interpretation (Guetterman et al., 2021) as the Trust Survey is a six-level Likert scale with 3.0 or higher representing agreement with items.

The integrated data demonstrate that youth in foster care report low levels of trust in

| Theme Alignment: Unfair Treatment Across Various Systems; Trust in School Environments                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Theme Alignment: Supportive Social Networks                                                                                     |                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Items with Lowest Level of Agreement (Item Mean)                                                                             | Quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Items with Highest Level of Agreement (Item Mean)                                                                               | Quote                                                                                                   |
| Most people can be trusted (1.8)                                                                                             | <i>"I don't think you can just trust mostly anybody who's in like a system like that because they tend to blow stuff out of proportion if you even come to them for like any problems. And they tend to make your life way worse than it actually was."</i> | My family is important in my life (4.1)                                                                                         | <i>"Because they're there for you. They raise you and stuff."</i>                                       |
| I personally trust my school (2.2)                                                                                           | <i>"The teachers at my school sit around and gossip with students...so there isn't anyone you can really trust."</i>                                                                                                                                        | My friends are important in my life (3.7)                                                                                       | <i>"They support me with stuff, they help me, you know?"</i>                                            |
| I personally trust the legal system (1.8)<br><br>The police make fair, impartial decisions in the cases they deal with (1.9) | <i>"It's because sometimes they do things that they're not supposed to do, like an unwanted search. Or they could put drugs in your car and act like that's yours."</i>                                                                                     | I have someone in my life who I can contact in a crisis (3.9)<br><br>There are people in my life who really care about me (3.9) | <i>"Being there when I'm struggling"</i><br><br><i>"[Available for] listening when I need to talk."</i> |
| The courts make fair, impartial decisions based on the evidence made available to them (2.1)                                 | <i>"I kept telling the court that I wanted to stay with my foster parents, [but] they kept trying to put me with my dad..."</i>                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                         |

Figure 2. Joint display of trust survey items and thematic categories.

institutions (the legal and school systems) and high levels of trust in social network actors such as family and friends. The thematic categories and in vivo quotes reveal youths’ views of the supportive actions/roles of family and friends that build trust. The qualitative findings also provide examples of specific experiences that thwarted trust development in the foster care and court systems as well as troubling

examples of unfair treatment in interactions with the police. In addition, the results of the group comparison that revealed an interaction of race/ethnicity, gender, and receiving special education services, and the qualitative findings as reflected in the in vivo quotes provide details related to experiences that possibly contribute to lower levels of trust for Black males with dis/abilities in particular.

## Discussion and Implications for Policy and Practice

Youth in foster care live at the intersection of multiple systems, all of which shape trust development. This study highlights the value of mixed methods for examining particularized trust (Heimer, 2001) by aligning both quantitative patterns and qualitative accounts that illuminate how trust is experienced and constructed across overlapping institutional systems by youth with and without disabilities in foster care. Knowledge of trust development is important to inform practice, as previous research has demonstrated the relationship between trust and positive educational and well-being outcomes (e.g., Bi et al., 2025; Skobba et al., 2018). The results from this study demonstrate the importance of youth participation in decision-making within foster care systems, legal systems, and school systems and illuminate the barriers and facilitators of trust development in interactions and experiences across these systems.

### *Legal System*

Both the quantitative and qualitative data in this study reveal the importance of youth voices in decision-making regarding placements within the foster care system and within the court system proceedings (e.g., Ball et al., 2023; Heyman et al., 2020). As demonstrated in the Trust Survey item statistics, the youth in this study reported low levels of trust in the legal system and in the fairness of court decisions. The interviews with youth provided examples of not feeling heard in court relative to placement decisions, and youth identified specific examples of perceived dishonesty by foster parents and case managers. Our findings support the previous research that has highlighted the importance of youth ownership in decision-making (e.g., Spencer et al., 2020). Our findings further support the criticality of “encouraging youth voice and choice” to facilitate trust in system actors and to position youth “as leaders and experts in their own lives” (Raemakers et al., 2025, p. 5).

The integrated data also revealed very low trust levels in the police, and the youth

experiences shared provide troubling examples of racialized interactions with the police. This finding is aligned with the deep history of mistrust in the police in communities of color (e.g., Pryce & Chenane, 2021). While this complex issue is beyond the scope of this study, our findings do point to the need to consider the intersectional identities of youth and their experiences in overlapping systems. Youth in this study reported the lowest levels of trust in legal systems (police and courts) and schools, and this pattern aligned with qualitative accounts describing unfair treatment, lack of voice, and dishonesty as factors eroding trust in institutional systems (Cashmore, 2002; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008). These findings align with previous research that suggests that youth are selectively distrustful based on system behavior and the role of the system actors, such as police, guardians ad litem, educators, or foster parents (Heimer, 2001). Our findings also support earlier research that indicates trust is shaped by institutional practices and interactions with system actors based on their role, not necessarily by individual youth dispositions (Soss & Weaver, 2017; Tyler & Jackson, 2014). As a result, responsibility for trust building must be understood as a system-level obligation, particularly for institutions that make decisions about youth without their control or consent.

### *Education System*

The youth responses from the quantitative data reflected relatively low levels of school trust, but the qualitative data revealed variability in youth experiences that built or thwarted trust within schools. Some of the youth identified supportive teachers and counselors within their school settings and described the trustworthy behaviors as being related to demonstrating caring and advocacy with other school personnel. However, many youth recounted specific system behaviors (inconsistency and, in some cases, lying or gossiping) as contributors to youth disengagement and mistrust, which may be understood as a self-protective response to the circumstances and systems that youth are required to navigate (Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Unrau, 2007). In educational

settings, our findings indicated that trust depended heavily on the actions of individual adults, efforts to support relational continuity, educator accountability, and safe spaces for youth disclosure. These actions may be particularly important, as recent research has identified trust in teachers as being linked to increased school engagement, decreased risk of dropping out, and increased student well-being (Fenizia & Parrello, 2025; Holzer & Daumiller, 2025). Our findings of a significant three-way interaction between gender, race/ethnicity, and receipt of special education services related to trust highlight the importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and the need to view youth through this lens when interpreting youth behavior. Rather than perceiving the behavior of vulnerable youth who have experienced trauma as evidence of youth disengagement or dis/ability, education system actors might understand these behaviors as functional responses to dysfunctional systems (Fader et al., 2014; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

### *Support System*

Importantly, family bonds and supportive friend networks were reported by youth through both the Trust Survey item statistics reflecting the highest levels of trust, as well as in the interview responses, highlighting instrumental and emotional support provided by friends and by biological family members. These fundamental family relationships, as noted by youth, contradict the often deficit-based narratives on family separation (e.g., Leber & LeCroy, 2012) and support earlier research with youth in foster care that found that “despite some of the difficulties that occurred in their family of origins, youth and caregivers repeatedly stressed the importance of staying connected to biological family members” (Heyman et al., 2020, p. 5). Youth perspectives on the importance of maintaining family connections while youth are in care have been previously reported (e.g., Collins et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2025), and recent research has demonstrated that kinship involvement is associated with positive outcomes for youth and plays “a vital role in supporting youth thriving” (Hodgkinson et al.,

2025, p. 1). Collins et al. (2010) have recommended family-focused interventions to enable reconnection with biological family as part of transition-age services provided for all youth aging out of foster care. Harwick et al. (2020) provide recommended resources to support these connections that include a family engagement toolkit designed for foster care case managers and other system personnel (see <https://www.nccwe.org/toolkits/family-engagement/introduction.htm>).

### *Summary*

Across systems, trust should be treated as an indicator of institutional functioning rather than an individual characteristic that youth are expected to develop on their own (Tyler & Jackson, 2014). Trust can be cumulatively eroded by perceived dishonesty and system failures (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Thus, systems should adopt procedural justice and ethical practices (e.g., Weisz et al., 2008), including system-level monitoring of commitments to youth to reduce overpromising and enhance follow-through, which were strategies identified by youth as critical to experiencing or maintaining trust over time. Training for system actors may help prevent and repair breaches of trust, but it should be role-specific (e.g., caseworker, foster parents, judges, and educators) rather than generic “trauma-informed” training, which has become a standard of practice in many systems. Our findings highlight the need for institutional practices that promote transparency, consistency, and youth participation across systems (e.g., Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008). In courts and child welfare processes, these practices may include clear explanations of decisions, structured opportunities for youth voice and decision-making, continuity of representation, and acknowledgment of harm, especially for youth who experience intersecting marginalization and trauma.

### *Limitations*

While the mixed methods design allows for the examination of the complex and multidimensional concept of trust, there are some limitations in this study. The participant sample is

relatively small ( $N=53$  and  $N=30$ ) and includes only high school students, which may limit the generalizability of the quantitative results. Also of note, the qualitative focus groups included students served in both general and special education, and therefore, student responses do not include specific identification of teachers (whether general education or special education support personnel). This is a limitation of our study, as there is considerable research literature related to the importance of decision-making involvement for students served in special education (e.g., Test et al., 2004). The Trust Survey is a newly developed measure, and although the Rasch model analysis provides promising unidimensionality and reliability estimates for the measure, the developing psychometric properties require additional research.

### ***The Promise of Mixed Methods for Future Research***

The use of mixed methods was necessary to examine the level of trust in social institutions by youth with and without disabilities in foster care and allowed us to center the perspectives of youth related to facilitators and barriers to trust development across contexts. The mixed methods outcomes revealed that youth in foster care report low levels of trust, but qualitative responses provided deep insights related to the *with whom* and *why* of trust development. Future research could examine trust as a system-level outcome and explore how trust changes over time and across systems. This would allow for the examination of the potential relationship among institutional practices such as transparency, youth participation in decision-making, and relational continuity that are associated with improved engagement and long-term outcomes for youth in care.

The results of the Trust Survey measure are promising, but there is a need for additional research to replicate and/or expand on the measure's psychometric properties.

Future studies should consider how systems could measure their own trustworthiness and develop metrics to monitor support services and evaluate the implementation of strategies

that may develop and/or repair trust of youth. A focus on youth trust has the potential to transform both individual well-being outcomes for vulnerable youth as well as foster more humanizing and supportive practices across systems.

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