

Theory of Academic Optimism and Student Achievement

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Three streams of research over several decades have converged with each other to explain student achievement in schools: Collective efficacy, collective faculty trust, and academic emphasis have consistently been positively associated with academic achievement, even after controlling for SES. Hence, it should not be especially surprising that they come together to form a latent construct called academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter, Hoy, 2006). In the following discussion we briefly sketch this construct and its elements and then explain how academic optimism influences higher student achievement for all students. Let's begin by defining the composite elements of academic optimism and how they interact.

Collective Efficacy is the shared perceptions of teachers in a school that efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on students (Hoy & Miskel, 2013).

Collective Faculty Trust in Students and Parents is the willingness of the faculty as a whole to risk vulnerability to a parents and colleagues with confidence that both groups can be relied upon, i.e., are benevolent, competent, and open.

Academic Emphasis is the school's press for academic achievement; a school with high academic emphasis has high achievement standards, faculty belief that all students can achieve, and an environment in which students work hard and respect those who achieve.

These three elements and their interactions form the construct of *academic optimism*. The main idea that unites the three concepts is optimism because each of the concepts contains a sense of the possible. Collective efficacy is the belief that the faculty can make a positive contribution to student learning. Faculty trust in parents and students implies that parents, teachers, and students can cooperate to improve learning. Academic emphasis is the enacted behavior driven by efficacy and trust beliefs, all of which focus on academic success of students. The research supports the idea that these three collective concepts work in a unified fashion to create a

positive academic culture that is called academic optimism. Note that the three elements of academic optimism have cognitive, affective, and behavioral features. Collective efficacy is a *cognitive* group belief; collective trust in parents and students is an *affective* response; and academic emphasis is a *behavioral* enactment.

The set of relationships between the collect efficacy, collective faculty trust, and academic emphasis is conceived as a triadic group of interactions with each element functionally dependent on the others. The postulated reciprocal causal relationships between the three pairs of elements of academic optimism are pictured in Figure 7.1. The model suggests that (1) faculty trust in parents and students encourages a sense of collective efficacy, which in turns reinforces and enhances the trust; (2) faculty trust in parents enables teachers to insist on high academic standards with confidence that they will not be undermined by the parents, and the high academic standards in turn reinforce strong faculty trust; and (3) finally, when the faculty believes it has the capacity to organize and execute actions that have positive effects on student achievement, that is has strong collective efficacy, academic achievement is promoted, and reciprocally, academic emphasis reinforces a strong sense of collective efficacy. In sum, all of the elements of academic optimism have transactional relationships with each other and interact to create a school culture of academic optimism. See Figure 1 below.

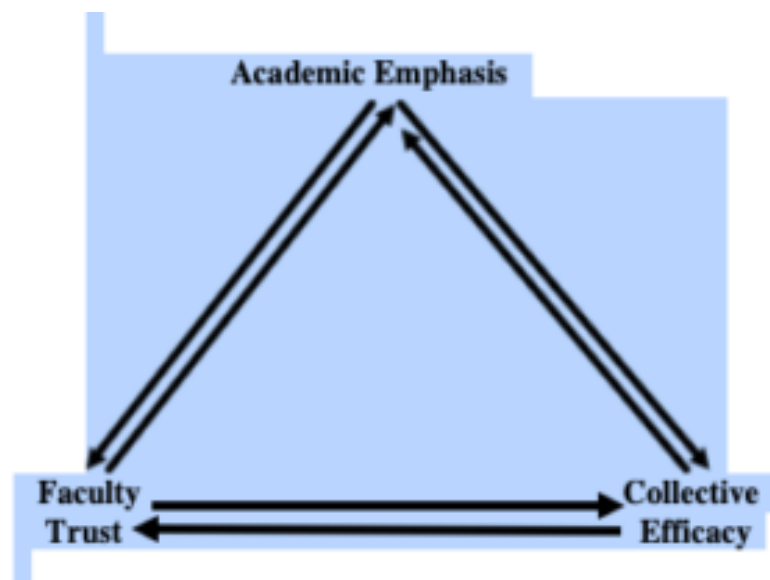


Figure 1 Triadic Interactions of the Basic Elements of Academic Optimism

Academic Optimism is a collective set of beliefs about the strengths and capabilities of a school in which optimism is the overarching theme that unifies collective efficacy and collective trust with academic emphasis.

How does a robust culture of academic optimism function to improve the academic performance in schools--by providing the school with a strong motivational structure that focuses on academic achievement. Let's be specific. First, the school culture helps teachers and students set and embrace specific, attainable, challenging learning-goals, which enhance motivation. Second, relational trust (working through academic optimism) fosters a learning environment in which students and teachers accept responsibility for learning, are motivated to exert vigorous effort, persist in difficult tasks, and are resilient in the face of difficulties and failures. Third, academic optimism encourages cooperation among students, teachers, and parents in matters of student learning, which also enhances student motivation. Moreover, relational trust between parents and teachers reinforces academic optimism as well as promotes a spirit of cooperation. Both challenging, attainable learning-goals and cooperation among students, teachers, and parents lead to strong motivation, which in turn leads to high levels of achievement, which in turn reinforces both relational trust and academic optimism (Hoy, 2014).

These interrelationships producing student achievement are summarized and illustrated in Figure 2. See also Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006) for a fuller explanation as well as empirical support.



Figure 2 Explanation of the Effect of Academic Optimism on Student Achievement