

CULTIVATING TRUST IN SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

The overall aim of this article is to advance an understanding of trust in school context, particularly in relation to school leadership. The specific study objectives are: 1. To identify and evaluate critically the barriers to and the promotion of trust in order to foster it in schools; 2. To formulate recommendations for trust issues.

The literature identifies the main reasons why schools have become involved in trust: as a form of social capital; a foundation of professional learning communities; as a basis for networking; as a main factor in distributed leadership; as a factor in positive school improvement and as an important component of school leadership.

The conclusions have to be viewed in terms of a caveat. The conclusions are based on an extensive review of the related literature, which means that the conclusions are linked to this source only.

These recommendations would have a number of benefits. Firstly, school leaders themselves would understand collectively why trust is important to schools and what the benefits are to the school as a whole, as well as to staff and students. Secondly, they would then be in a much better position to win staff participation. When schools build up trust, teachers can interact openly, and ask each other about any problems, both personal and professional. Thirdly, good trusting relationships between teachers attract parents, who are more likely to recognize when teachers rely on each other and have mutual interdependence, and so improve school results together.

Keywords: Education; Trust; Culture; School achievement; Leadership; Social capital.

1. INTRODUCTION

The important role of trust in society and human life is growing. Trust is fundamental to interpersonal relationships, societal and international relations. Trust is also central to a fulfilling life and a good society and makes family relationships stronger. Fukuyama (1995) contends that, in families where members relate to each other with trust, then these families are successful economically. Similarly, Bruhn (2001) asserts that

being trusted and becoming trustworthy originates in families where parents teach their children trust and trustworthiness. Trust is also vital in business organisations. Bruhn (2001) found trust to be the key to an organisation's health and a foundation for positive outcomes. Above all, a high-trust environment may enable people to gain good communication, openness, and competence. People who work where there is low or no trust face uncertainty, risk and maybe even fear. In turn, these factors may make a negative impact on the success or failure of an organisation.

Schools, like organisations, pay more attention to trust as an important component of improvement and effectiveness. Relationships between school leaders, teachers, students and parents based on trust are more likely to yield positive results for schools. A school is a social place, so positive outcomes result from good communication, participation in decision-making, respect and personal regard. If there is no trust in this environment, then it may not be possible to promote those results. Bryk and Schneider (2002) confirm that, though schools' goals are defined, it is virtually impossible to achieve those goals if there are no relationships based on trust, where teachers understand each other and work in co-operation in the interest of students. Bryk and Schneider (2002) also call for more rigorous research into fostering trust in schools.

It is not difficult to find examples of schools responding to the call to pay attention to trust and building it. There are annual conferences worldwide focused on trust, one of which was organised by the Pearson Foundation (see www.pearson.com), where scholars from all over the world discussed the Finnish success in school achievement through trust. Many countries try to draw on the experiences of Finland because, in this country, 'the school system is based upon the core values of trust, co-operation and responsibility' (Harris, 2008, p. 4). East Lothian Council, a local authority in Scotland, has enthusiastically embraced fostering trust in its schools.

Nevertheless, researchers notice that there is still a gap in existing research in building trust (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). They complain of too little research into trust in schools. School leaders usually fail to build trust in their schools because they do not know appropriate strategies; barriers impede them from working successfully. Hence, this article will benefit not only teachers but also students, parents, headteachers and the whole school community in filling this gap and confronting this problem.

The school environment which includes trusting relationships is changing the role of its leaders and urging them to become more caring and trustworthy. Stephenson (2009) underlines that this change requires new skills, including personal and interpersonal capacity strategies, the ability and courage to begin building trust, and the skill to create cultures to meet the needs of others. Headteachers 'can create positive, caring, and intellectually challenging schools' (Deal and Peterson, 1999, p. xii) when they shape a school's culture.

To gain a deeper understanding of these issues related to building trust in schools, one main activity will need to be tackled: a review of relevant literature to ascertain current research findings concerning trust-building issues, including potential barriers and motivation factors as mentioned earlier. Furthermore, to gain a meaningful picture of how trust is being built, it is important to place trust-building issues in the context of the wider 'trust building picture' in schools. Therefore the reasons that are driving schools to build trust, and potential motivation and the barriers to trust in fostering it to develop more effective schools will be examined.

One can argue that teachers work in the interest of children, devoting most of their time to students in schools, using and showing their energy, and making a difference with their commitment. However, co-operation with other colleagues, organisational benefits and the development of effectiveness are more likely to come with trust, when teachers are confident in their colleagues. There may be suspicion and even fear among staff, when they are dubious about whether or not they can trust their colleagues in devising projects or discussing serious school issues. This may 'lead to a complicated web of distrust' (Stephenson, 2009, p. 9), if school leaders do not take notice in time and take measures at the initial stage. In other words, trust may be a key mechanism for facilitating school improvement, which can be promoted by school leaders. Creating successful schools based on trust with positive outcomes benefits students, teachers, parents and the whole school community, so this also makes the study of trust an area worthy of study.

2. DEFINING TRUST

2.1 Defining Trust

Scientists are concerned about the ambiguity of the definition of trust (Mayer *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, the definition of trust is not always consistent, even in social sciences. Trust theorists conceptualise trust as a psychological state in which one party is ready to be vulnerable and take risks, relying upon the other one,

so that both parties can achieve their interest. A similar point is made by Robinson (2006), where she characterises trust as 'one's expectations, assumptions, or beliefs about the likelihood that another's future actions will be beneficial, favourable or, at least, not detrimental to one's interests' (p. 333).

However, some researchers emphasise the need for the conceptualisation of trust as a psychological state with affective components. Fine and Holyfield (1996) assert that, in order to understand the nature of trust, cognitive components of trust are necessary but not sufficient. They argue that: 'Interpretation is possible only in a world of cultural meanings, emotional responses and social relations ... one not only thinks trust but feels trust' (p.25).

Other scholars stress the importance of trust in terms of the individual's choice of behaviour. However, there are two contrasting concepts of choice: rational and calculative, and social and relational terms. The rational and calculative choice perspective is usually used in organisational science: 'From the perspective of rational choice theory, decisions about trust are similar to other forms of risky choice: individuals are presumed to be motivated to make rational, efficient choices' (Kramer, 2006, p. 4). In his conception of encapsulated trust, Hardin (2006) explains that the main factor in trusting people, each is to understand the other's interests and the relevance of their way of interacting and timing. Hardin (1991) asserts: 'You can more confidently trust me, if you know that my own interests will induce me to live up to your expectations. Your trust then encapsulates my interests' (p. 189).

Nevertheless, there is a limitation to conceptions of trust in terms of the rationality of choice, in that such conceptions 'are too narrowly cognitive' and have 'too little a role in emotional and social influences on trust decisions' (Kramer, 2006, p. 5). Therefore, some researchers argue that trust theory should have not only a calculative orientation but also a social and relational basis. Increasing attention to the relational conceptions of trust has enabled research to be developed on the influence of social relations on economic action, and on a variety of 'macrolevel' structures of trust (Kramer, 2006).

In spite of divergent views of trust definition, Johnson-George and Swap (1982) tried to define a common feature of trust: 'Willingness to take risks may be one of the few characteristics common to all situations' (p. 1306). According to this definition, taking risks is considered as trusting others. Unfortunately, this definition, although having the benefit of brevity, suffers from a lack of clarity. For example, it is difficult to see that main facets of trust, such as benevolence, honesty, openness, competence and reliability are excluded from this definition. Conversely, these facets are all-inclusive and therefore this definition is not useful in understanding what counts as trust.

Mayer *et al.* (2006) are critical about the definition where the latter confuses trust with cooperation. He writes: 'the probability that he [individual] will perform an action that is beneficial or at least not detrimental to us is high enough for us to consider engaging in some form of cooperation with him' (p. 217). As Mayer *et al.* (2006) explain, they do not see trust as a condition for cooperation to happen, because 'co-operation does not necessarily put a party at risk' (p. 85). They suggest as their definition: 'The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the truster, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party' (p. 85). In spite of these two contrasting concepts, the notion of risk and the link between trust and co-operation, 'common understandings about trust have emerged that can be built' (Bijlsma and Koopman, 2003, p. 543).

3. WHY TRUST IS IMPORTANT FOR SCHOOLS

3.1 Why Trust is Important for Schools

Trust theory is usually criticised for its 'blindness' in exploiting and taking advantage of others, and even leading to crime against the organisation (Lewicki *et al.*, 2006). The supporters of this criticism highlight both trust and distrust. Stephenson (2009) asserts: 'Never trusting and always trusting are both inappropriate' (p. 91). Nevertheless, Jamieson and O'Mara (1991) predict a growth in ethnic minorities in organisations in the coming years. They claim trust enhances relationships between people from different cultures enabling them to work together. Trust is important in schools for several reasons; however, it is complex and difficult to achieve the goals which schools set.

Many parents demand not only an academic basis of schooling but they also require their children to have cultural knowledge (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). As expectations grow, the fulfilment of the school's mission becomes difficult. The lack of specific practice to achieve the best results and the difficulty of monitoring what teachers are doing in their classrooms may engender the suspicion of parents. In this case, mutual understanding, interdependencies, respect and trust may work as a buffer in collaborating to make schools

successful. This highlights the importance of trust in the school context.

4. TRUST AS A SOCIAL CAPITAL

4.1 Trust as a Social Capital

Coleman (1990) notes that social capital is certain actions of people who are within one organisation. He claims that social capital is fruitful in achieving the goals of both parties that would not be feasible without its presence. This plays an important role in facilitating relationships between people. He defines social capital as 'the value of those aspects of social structure to actors, as resources that can be used by the actors to realize their interests' (p. 305). Coleman (1990) found trust to be a critical element of social capital, 'which means that obligations will be repaid, and the actual extent of obligations held', (p. 306). He concludes that, without a high degree of trust, it would be impossible to create social capital.

Day's (2007) study, in which he researched the achievements of ten successful headteachers in challenging urban schools, indicates that 'trust is drawing upon and constructing social capital within the school and between the school and its local community' (p.68). His investigation also revealed that headteachers influenced their colleagues to work in collaboration, combining trust, leadership qualities and total commitment. All the headteachers possessed a sense of identity, trusted their teachers and 'they placed a priority on building trust through establishing cultures and decision-making systems' (p. 68).

Moller *et al.* (2007) argue that considering trust is a fundamental factor in creating successful school leadership based on democratic values, which encourages teachers in participation and problem-solving. This network of social connections that exists between teachers together with their shared values and norms of behaviour, enables and encourages mutually advantageous social co-operation and good results for students. Kramer (1999) also characterises trust as a form of social capital, suggesting three important organisational benefits: firstly, 'reducing transaction costs within organisations'; secondly, 'increasing spontaneous sociability among organisational members', and finally, 'facilitating appropriate forms of deference to organisational authorities' (p. 582).

5. THE ROLE OF TRUST IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

5.1 The Role of Trust in School Improvement

Trust has many positive school benefits and is an important ingredient of successful schools (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). It works as a facilitator in advancing collaboration and co-operation, improving organisational productivity, and developing communication. Some scholars characterise trust as the binding agent in schools (Beatty and Brew, 2004). Tschannen-Moran (2004) points out: 'Trust is glue that holds things together, as well as a lubricant that reduces friction and facilitates smooth operations. Trust is also a choice that involves risk' (p. 38).

Trust is also useful in uniting leaders' and followers' relationships (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Teachers observe their headteacher's actions, which are important for schools. When teachers trust their leaders, they may secure the headteacher's support, care and respect. A headteacher's trust in the teaching staff is central to ensure that teachers embrace organisational change and meet school reform optimistically.

Kochanek (2005) emphasises the importance of trust in schools, especially in times of reform. Teachers who place high trust in their colleagues are more likely to be open to school reform. In a high-trust workplace, school staff may create opportunities for each other to reflect on how to meet educational change and in which ways reform might be helpful in students' interest and learning. Kochanek (2005) concludes that recent study on trust in an educational setting has showed 'a positive relationship between trust and school effectiveness, making a connection between the growth of trust and organisational changes, which can lead to improved educational outcomes for students' (p. 6).

Bryk and Schneider (2002) found that trust enabled some Chicago schools to improve their students' achievement. These schools' academic gains were higher than those which had low levels of trust. They conclude that, if schools continue working with a low level of trust, then there are unlikely to be schools with positive student achievement. They assert that trust 'foments a moral imperative to take on the hard work of school improvement' (p. 123).

6. TRUST AS AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

6.1 Trust as an Important Component of Successful School Leadership

A wide range of literature concerned with school leadership has acknowledged that trust is one of the elements of successful leadership, which works as a bridge between heads, teachers, students and parents (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Day, 2007; Moller *et al.*, 2007). Building trust among staff, pupils and parents is central to school leaders because it can improve school academic performance. Leithwood *et al.* (2004) highlight the importance of the paramount positive influence of school leaders: 'there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented leaders' (p. 17). They also refer to leadership as a catalyst in contributing to turn-arounds. These important claims may call for the assessment of the function of powerful leaders who can create working conditions to make schools perform well and bring about substantial changes.

Harris' (2004) content analysis of schools showed that trust is 'essential to foster positive feelings of involvement and ownership' (p. 402). Weymes (2002) argues that organisations will flourish when there are shared values, purposes and information where these are based not on blind obedience but on trust and integrity. Beatty and Brew (2004) present data from which they infer that trust is important for leaders in building effective collaborative school cultures. They also claim that school leaders and teachers should display their enthusiasm and positive emotions to gain students' confidence and engage them in new learning. Future school leaders need to understand and engage teachers and students in collaborative reflective emotions and to develop trusting relationships to reach their goals. Similarly, Day *et al.* (2000) argued that school leaders' characteristics, such as optimism, respect, trust and intention were important to success. Showing invitational leadership, treating people with trust and respect and sharing experiences were a part of successful school leaders in leading schools effectively.

Harris (2008) presents evidence that developing an internal capacity for change is fundamental to successful leadership. This requires high trust to support a leadership climate, and she proposes a capacity-building model which consists of two components: 'the professional learning community and leadership capacity as the route to generating the social cohesion and trust to make this happen' (p. 133). When people trust each other, they expect others to behave and work in a productive way, and trust is 'the first fatality of imposed reform' (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006, p. 212). Trust plays an important role in enhancing school leadership and is a 'mediating variable in studies' (Leithwood and Day, 2007, p. 9).

7. CONCLUSION

However, there is no unique mechanism to build trust, so headteachers use their abilities, appropriate strategies and plan in different ways, depending on the situation of the school. For example, some schools have a low-trust environment; in this case, there is the question what is the best way to start, where teachers are uncertain, isolated and vulnerable to taking risks. On the other hand, there is a high degree of trust in other schools, where school leaders should work on how to keep and sustain that trust. However, the main concern is to work for the welfare of the children, understanding 'the dynamics of trust in order to reap its benefits for greater student achievement' (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. xii). When headteachers can build trust in teachers, it spreads to students, parents and comes back to headteachers with positive results for the whole school environment.

Despite attempts to close it, there remains an enormous gap between educational theory and practice, arguably on what is the best way to build trust in schools. As evidenced in this article, trusting school leaders are more likely to be successful in fostering trust in their colleagues. It has also been argued that identifying the level of trust of teachers is a necessary step to know the atmosphere within a school staff. Supportive leadership, which has important facets of trust, such as benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability and competence develops and sustains trust. However, in spite of some doubts, as explained above, the removal of incompetent teachers with negative attitudes was one of the main factors which enhances trust.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations would have a number of benefits. Firstly, school leaders themselves would understand collectively why trust is important to schools and what the benefits are to the school as a whole, as well as to staff and students. Secondly, they would then be in a much better position to win staff participation. When schools build up trust, teachers can interact openly, and ask each other about any

problems, both personal and professional. Thirdly, good trusting relationships between teachers attract parents, who are more likely to recognise when teachers rely on each other and have mutual interdependence, and so improve school results together.

The metaphor of 'an orchestral conductor' has been used to describe the headteacher as a trained musician; providing the direction and care for orchestral members through knowledge and professionalism, just as a school leader also provides for teachers. However, this demands careful listening and an overview of all musicians. When boundaries are imposed by the coercive policies of school leaders, positive school outcomes are severely restricted. A play performed in harmony by a team of professionals who trust one another gives joy and happiness to its audience. Similarly, schools with high-trust environments are more likely to yield fruitful results. It is therefore essential to foster trust, using appropriate strategies and to develop a better understanding of trust.

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