Fostering Social Trust through Educational Programs
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What is it and why is it important?

Social Trust
Social trust is the belief that others in society, people we do not even know, are basically fair, that they would not take advantage of or harm us. Social trust is different from the trust we share between family and friends, which is based on intimate knowledge of them and a rich history of interaction. Social trust, in contrast, involves trust towards others in general, including people that are more distant and less familiar. Since it is not based on information about particular people, social trust is a leap of faith, a decision to give other people the benefit of the doubt.

Social trust is an important foundation for democracy. Democratic societies rely on social trust for maintaining social order. When citizens are generally trusting of each other and can assume that others are committed to following rules that benefit the community, social order can be upheld without resorting to constant vigilance, surveillance and coercive measure by the government. Additionally, social trust contributes to democracy by motivating and sustaining cooperation. In a more trusting society, people do not only act on behalf of their own interests, but are willing to contribute to the common good.

How is social trust developed in youth?

What can educators do to foster social trust?

Starting at a young age, children and youth develop dispositions and beliefs that affect their civic engagement as adults. Schools, after-school programs and other educational contexts are often the first contexts where young people participate as a member of a community beyond their families, making them important sites of civic development. These sites serve as microcosms of the larger society for youth. Through these sites, youth develop connections to the broader society, learn to exercise their rights and responsibilities as members of a community and start to develop civic attitudes through their current relationships and experiences in educational contexts.
Civil Environments
– Democratic authority structures

Research has shown that the climates of educational contexts have an impact on youth social trust. Specifically, social trust is fostered in more civil environments. Democratic authority structures are one of the main characteristics of civil learning environments that foster social trust. Educators who exercise democratic authority trust and respect students, encourage them to voice their views, and insist on principles of tolerance as the basis for discussion and dissent. By doing so, these educators are teaching several aspects of trust and civic participation. First, they open up space for students to voice their opinions, even when they disagree with each other or with the educator. This provides opportunities for students to learn how to disagree in a respectful and civil way and negotiate authority. Second, these educators allow students to share in the governance of the group. Students learn to participate in democratic governance through this process. Finally, as educators exercise democratic authority, they are expressing their trust in students to use this freedom in a civil and responsible way. This supports students in developing confidence and civic efficacy.

Implications for educators:
Educators can facilitate their students’ development of social trust by creating democratic authority structures. This means creating an open environment where all can express their opinions, giving students power to make decisions together for the group. Students may need support in exercising these freedoms at first. Educators can teach and model various aspects of participation, such as how to disagree respectfully, how to make decisions for the benefit of the group, and how to deliberate together and find common ground, despite differences. Schools and educational organizations can support educators by creating organization-wide democratic authority structures in which educators can participate in shared governance.

Civil Environments
– Organizational solidarity

The second characteristic of civil learning environments is organizational solidarity. When a school or organization has a strong sense of solidarity, students feel a sense of collective identity – with fellow students, with educators, and with the school or organization as an institution. Organizational solidarity boosts students’ social trust because it increases youths’ realization of their interdependence with fellow human beings. It also fosters a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself that can have a positive impact on our perceptions of others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Studies have shown that students’ sense of connection and solidarity with the school and with fellow members of the institution predicts higher levels of social trust among middle- and high-school students (Flanagan & Stout, 2010) and civic engagement in early adulthood (Duke et al., 2008; Smith, 1999).

Implications for educators:
When youth feel that teachers at their school respected students’ autonomous opinions and encouraged a respectful exchange of views, it increases their sense of solidarity. Solidarity can also be fostered through caring relationships between educators and students as well as practices that promote students’ attention to and consideration of fellow students’ views, such as classroom discussions of controversial issues that increase students’ perspective taking (Hess, 2009). Furthermore, educators can encourage youth to participate in clubs and organizations, which are great venues for them to experience working with others towards a common goal.

Opportunities for Diverse Interactions
Along with building a civil climate, educational programs also foster social trust by providing youth with opportunities to engage with people who are different from themselves and are beyond the social circle with whom they would typically interact. A study was conducted on the effects of participation in organizations and community service on social trust. The results revealed that youth who participated in neither community service nor organizations had the lowest levels of social trust. Students who participated in organizations had lower levels of social trust than those who participated in community service (Flanagan, Gill & Gallay, 2005). One reason students engaged in community service had the highest levels of social trust is because, through their service, they had opportunities to encounter people in their communities that are outside of their normal social circles. Youth can develop more positive views of others in the community.
and unlearn stereotypes during these encounters. Furthermore, it allows youth to gain a deeper understanding of the conditions that others in their society live in and their beliefs about the obligations that members of a society owe one another, which also strengthens social trust.

Implications for educators:

Educators can provide community service opportunities to youth and encourage their participation. Community service is more effective for fostering social trust when youth volunteer on a more frequent basis and when the service involved direct interaction with people in need as opposed to functionary work like stuffing envelopes (Flanagan, Stoppa, Syvertsen & Stout, 2010).

Parents’ Perceptions of Educational Organizations

Parents’ perception of programs strongly influences their children’s perception of programs and development of social trust. In a study of parents’ perceptions of schools, researchers found that most parents held distrusting views about schools in general. Parents who were less trusting of schools were less likely to perceive their own children’s schools to have civil environments (democratic authority structures and school solidarity), and their children also tended to be distrustful of schools and perceive their own school in a more negative light. The study also found that these negative perceptions were likely influenced by negative stereotypes about schools rather than the specific circumstances of their own local school (Flanagan et al., 2010). When parents hold negative stereotypes about schools in general, these views may be corrosive to both their own and their children’s perceptions of their immediate school environment. Parents who hold more favorable perspectives on schools, however, tend to have and to inspire in their children more positive connections to their schools.

Implications for educators:

Schools and education organizations can make an effort to mitigate the negative stereotypes many parents have about schools by communicating with them and making the school or organization more accessible to them so that they can gain a more realistic picture of the educational climate there. Educators can reach out to parents, solicit their perspectives about how to better meet the needs of their children and be responsive to parents’ concerns. This can enhance parents’ experience of the school or organization as caring and trustworthy.

How do these lessons apply to youth of different racial backgrounds and ages?

A study found that regardless of racial background, youth who felt that their schools were civil environments and who felt higher levels of solidarity in their communities were more likely to believe that the U.S. is a just society. They were also more committed to the goals of public interest, that is, to working to improve their community in general and race relations, in particular (Flanagan et al., 2007). In other words, what research tells us about the importance of a civil school environment for developing social trust holds true across racial backgrounds.

As youth mature, they develop different attitudes related to interpersonal trust (trust of family and friends) and social trust (general trust of others in society). Compared to younger youth who are transitioning into middle schools, older youth in the later high school years tend to have lower levels of social trust. They are also better able to distinguish between interpersonal trust and social trust. This means that they may be trusting of family and friends while simultaneously untrusting of society, or vice versa. Moreover, older youth have more stable levels of social trust. This means that a civil educational environment can have a greater impact on children’s and early adolescents’ development of social trust. A civil climate still makes a difference for social trust of older youth, but less so.

Implications for educators:

It is important to support social trust development in youth starting at a young age when youth are still in the process of forming their civic attitudes.
Works Cited and Additional Resources


