A Multidisciplinary Analysis of the Nature, Meaning, and Measurement of Trust

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The relinquishing of students from parental confines to school systems nationwide each year requires a faithful act of trust. Outside observers of educational institutions entrust that the youngest members of society will be given the utmost attention regardless of the inner struggles of those institutions. In addition to the trust placed upon each school by the microcosms of American society surrounding them, schools must come to terms with their own internal issues of trust that are deeply embedded in the commonplace and everyday occurrences of their individual institutions.

Drawing on four decades of theoretical and empirical literature as it relates to trust relationships within schools, this study closely examines the definitions of trust, the importance of trust in schools, the nature and meaning of trust, the dynamics of trust, and trust as it relates to the organizational structures and effectiveness of schools.

Citing our underlying reliance on, and need to place confidence in, other people to conform to our expectations, the initial aspects of this study examine the importance of trust. Specifically, the importance of trust is examined as it relates to school accountability and the rising humanistic costs of distrust. Accountability is discussed as it relates to a growing distrust by the media, while the costs of distrust appear in schools as students, teachers, and administrators jockey for power in counterproductive manners.

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy continue by examining the philosophical, economic, individual, and organizational definitions of trust. Once defined from various perspectives, trust is then examined by its various facets (vulnerability, confidence, benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness) as they relate to the educational forum. The authors emphasize the facet of vulnerability and its reoccurrence most often throughout the various definitions, stating “A person’s level of comfort in the midst of vulnerability speaks to the accompanying level of trust.”

This study cites two differing measures of trust. First, two-person mixed-motive games are researched. Also known as “prisoner’s dilemma” games, these activities seek to gauge the degree of trust between two individuals. Additionally, various trust surveys were reviewed, showing response on trust in behavioral measures, in generalized trust, with regards to intimate relationships, and trust in organizational settings.

Scenarios of trust in schools are most thoroughly discussed as the dynamics of trust (initiating, sustaining, and repairing trust) are examined. School-based hierarchical relationships, organizational attributes, reputation, betrayal, building constructive attitudes and actions, and the reparation of trust are included in this discussion. Additionally, the issues of collaboration between school personnel, organizational citizenship, and the institution of rules are discussed as they relate to the concept of trust.

Concluding remarks focus on the concept that trust within schools encourages productivity, while lack thereof impedes the progress of those organizations. As schools face the continuing challenges of reform, more attention needs to be placed on the trust created between school personnel (between boards and superintendent, superintendent and principals, principals and teachers, etc.). The implications of this study center on the need for increased trust among all facets of educational institutions and call for additional research in the field of cultivating trust among principals, faculty, and students.

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