

Chapter 2

Trust in Elementary and Secondary Urban Schools: A Pathway for Student Success and College Ambition

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2.1 Prologue

Profound distrust permeated the Chicago Public School System during the 1990s when broad system reforms decentralized decision making to Local School Councils. Administrators, teachers, and parents, many of whom held preconceived biases of ineptitude, ill-treatment, and abuses of power and control about each other found themselves in situations where they had to work together on governance and instructional programs at their schools (Greenberg [Rollow] 1998). It is in this environment that Anthony Bryk, a team of outstanding graduate students, and I conducted an in-depth study of 12 elementary school communities in Chicago to understand the micro-politics of school reform. In the course of this work, we initially thought that high incidences of interactions among school staff and parents characterized as “caring” (working from definitions of Noddings (1992) and others) would give us a set of assumptions upon which to identify positive relationships and steps toward reform. However, examining our data more closely suggested a different theoretical framework, one that was more consonant with our sociological understandings of how norms, shared values, and actions are developed and strengthened through organizational interactions among social groups. Working from a social capital framework (Coleman 1988, 1990; Luhmann 1979) complemented with work by Fukuyama (1995), Putnam (1993, 1995a, b), theories of social exchange (Blau 1986),

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and organizational behavioral and management literature (see the edited volume by Kramer and Tyler 1996), a new idea of “relational trust” began to emerge.

The conception of relational trust was a journey—one that lasted over a decade. It began with interrogating 1990s Chicago field notes including school and classroom observations and interviews followed by testing the constructs that developed from these data in analyses of longitudinal teacher surveys and student assessment information. Results from these efforts eventuated in the book, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (2002). This volume brought a different lens for investigating trust that had earlier been explored by Hoy and colleagues (Hoy and Kupersmith 1984, 1985; Tarter et al. 1989) in which trust was characterized more as a measure of school climate than one of social interactions. Trust has more recently been conceptualized as an organizational property that has effects on such outcomes as principal leadership (Kochanek 2005), student performance (Goddard et al. 2009), and student misbehavior (Gregory and Ripski 2008).

One of the highest compliments paid to a scientific idea and subsequent findings occurs when scholars continue to work in that area, aiming to replicate earlier results. In educational research, especially in schools, which are dynamic entities, efforts to find universal organizational properties that produce similar results over time can be frustrating and often disappointing. Our relational trust findings showed a positive relationship to school improvement at the elementary-level, based on district-wide surveys and student school assessment patterns over a five-year period from the onset of the reform through its sustained implementation. Such a design imposes considerable constraints on opportunities for replication. Despite the substantive and methodological challenges of examining trust in schools, the thought-provoking studies in this volume continue to produce empirical evidence—sometimes in agreement with our early relational trust research results and other times not so. It is indeed reassuring that both senior and emerging talented scholars continue to wrestle with these ideas and conduct studies that remain promising for advancing science and reform in education.

More recently, we have been implementing an intervention, the College Ambition Program (CAP), in public secondary schools to change the expectations and actions of low-income and minority students, so that they can maximize their college ambitions and matriculate to postsecondary school in the fall after high school graduation (<http://collegeambition.org>). CAP is grounded in principles of relational trust, and its activities are designed to strengthen the relational ties within the school by helping to craft among the school community (including students, teachers, counselors, and parents) shared norms and values, and the actions to achieve them. This chapter begins by describing relational trust and how the conceptual principles that undergird it can be applied at the high school level. This framework is followed with a presentation of preliminary results from the first three years of the CAP study, and a discussion of some of the limitations of its design and applications for measuring the effectiveness of relational trust for changing norms and behaviors. The conclusion discusses how best to realistically build relational trust within a high school using low risk activities and the importance of social relationships for creating change in expectations and actions.

2.2 Conceptual Roots of Relational Trust

In defining relational trust, it is useful to trace back to James Coleman's conception of social capital (Coleman 1988, 1990). Social capital as defined by Coleman is a set of relational ties that facilitate action. It is important to underscore that these sets of relational ties are defined as social networks characterizing social systems rather than the attributes of individuals. Abstract in form and embedded in human interactions, social capital is created through exchanges that establish shared expectations and construct and enforce norms, generating social networks perceived as trustworthy. These social norms are purposively formed to ensure that benefits can accrue to network members and sanctions are imposed when violations occur. The norms and resultant actions become the "capital" that makes possible the achievement of certain ends—such as teachers in a school expecting that academically successful students will apply to college and that these students complete the college application process (see Schneider (2000) for further discussion of social capital and norms).

Social capital is particularly useful for describing the actions of actors in social systems, such as families, schools, or communities. The denser and closer the relational ties in the network, the greater the likelihood that information will be communicated and subsequent actions undertaken. High degrees of interconnectedness among the members make it easier to repair miscommunications and other problems that could lead to the breakdown of the network. Information sharing is one aspect of what is exchanged in networks that create social capital; obligations and mutual expectations are the second. Obligations require action; expectations are assumptions about one's and others' behaviors. When shared by the collectivity, obligations and expectations affect each member's actions and become even stronger when sustained over time. Trustworthiness describes social networks where relational ties among members have generated mutual expectations and imposed consistent rewards and sanctions for desirable and undesirable actions.

Coleman's ideas focused on the structural properties of social networks (i.e., density—the strength of the ties, closure—the interconnection of ties over time, and trustworthiness—the embodiment of the obligations and expectations). Extending his ideas, the focus in the relational trust work (Bryk and Schneider 2002) was on explaining the nature of social interactions (i.e., relational ties)—from an interdisciplinary combination of economic, philosophical and social psychological frameworks—and then turning to how these interactions are observed in an organization, specifically in this case urban schools serving low-income minority students.

Trust can be viewed as an instrumental exchange whereby the motivation to trust between parties is determined by an assessment of the benefits and liabilities associated with an action. (This definition of trust can be found in the economic literature, mostly associated with game theory; see Coleman (1990) for further explanation.) For example, a teacher explains that if homework does not arrive on time students' grades will be lowered. A student may choose to hand the homework in on time, even though doing so may come with some costs, such as time that could be spent on another activity. Or the student may decide to take a risk that not turning in the assignment would have a minimum effect on the overall course grade and so it is

not worth the forgone time, or that the teacher may not impose the rule and there will be no real consequences for not completing the homework assignment. Such instrumental exchanges are based both on the potential payoff of the transaction and other structural conditions such as the power, influence, reputation, and prior actions of the parties.

From a social psychological framework, trust can be perceived as a bond or a connection that joins individuals together, thereby also separating them from others—my group, my class, my department. Trust in this instance can be a moral, ethical exchange. Here one is willing to engage in a social exchange, motivated to act on behalf of what is good for the group, even if it requires some self-sacrifice. An example of this would be a teacher who decides to miss a social appointment after school in order to stay late and work with students organizing a food drive for a homeless shelter.

2.2.1 Defining Relational Trust

Trust takes on somewhat different forms in various social systems. For example, organic trust can be found in small religious communities, where social exchanges are predicated on unquestioned beliefs and subject to a moral authority. Contractual trust can be found in business transactions and other organizations such as unions, where social exchanges are constrained by formalized rules, regulations, restrictions, and penalties. Relational trust can be found in social institutions like schools and hospitals where social exchanges are undertaken because of their social value.

Three key elements define relational trust. First, like organic trust but unlike contractual trust it is abstract, embedded in interpersonal relationships. Second, as in other forms of trust, the fulfillment of obligations and shared expectations affects the strength of social exchanges among the parties. Third, unique to relational trust, is that it functions as an organizational property, where capital is realized—as a social good that enhances the goals and work of an organization, like improving the quality of a school, by raising performance, reducing dropouts, or sending large numbers of students to postsecondary institutions.

Relational trust, like other forms of trust, is achieved through a complex web of social exchanges, often in instances where the parties have unequal or asymmetrical power relationships. This is particularly important as it underscores that in a trust relationship the parties will be in some way dependent on one another. This dependency creates vulnerability on the part of both parties. Even if one group has more to lose than the other party by not being engaged in the exchange, there are also benefits to the more powerful party, resulting in some risk for both parties involved in the negotiations. For example, a high school mathematics faculty wants to implement an innovative instructional program and needs the approval from the principal. The principal has some reservations about adopting the program but has high respect for the competence of the teachers. In deciding whether to approve the adoption of the program, the principal has to weigh the consequences of not going along with the teachers in this instance and being able to count on their support in other future matters.

As shown in the example above, social exchanges occur in the context of role relationships, such as teachers with administrators, teachers with students, and teachers with other teachers. In *Trust in Schools* (Bryk and Schneider 2002), this idea was termed “role sets,” which can be misunderstood as dyadic relationships (teacher to student) rather than as a way to distinguish the type of players (teachers) and the different roles they take on in various social exchanges as with administrators or parents. The idea of role relationships is important for delineating the obligations and expectations held by the parties in the social exchanges. If one of the parties fails to fulfill their obligations or does not maintain shared expectations, the value of relational trust is diminished. For example, teachers holding different college ambitions for their students on the basis of race or social class may diminish the relational trust between students and teachers. In instances where relational trust is threatened by variation rather than consistency in expectations and obligations—the value of the network for achieving a common good is weakened—which can lead to the dissipation of the network.

2.2.2 *Questions of Intentionality*

When engaged in social exchanges, there is always a concern about intentionality. For example, a member of a social system might not fulfill obligations, or show a change in expectations—or do more than is commonly perceived as required. Questions of intentionality are colored by one’s personal past experiences, cultural beliefs, and ascriptive characteristics like gender. At a more micro level, four elements characterize the process of intentionality (labeled ‘discernment’ in Bryk and Schneider (2002)). These are: (1) respect—sustained civil social interactions within the network; (2) competence—fulfillment of one’s obligations; (3) integrity—aligned actions (obligations) with commonly held expectations; and (4) personal regard for others—extending oneself for others beyond what is formally required in any given situation. Some have interpreted personal regard as an act of benevolence or caring; however, in defining relational trust, this idea has a somewhat different interpretation. Noddings (1984, 1992), for example, sees caring as a dyadic relationship between the “one-caring” and the “cared-for” (1984, p. 69), in which the “one-caring” demonstrates both (1) a deep understanding of the “cared-for,” and (2) a willingness to act in his or her best interest. However, personal regard extends beyond these elements and requires evidence of specific actions taken to go above and beyond what would typically be expected in a role relationship. Thus, there is a moral imperative to undertaking specific actions that extend beyond care for another, it involves making personal sacrifices that have intrinsic meaning and value when the end goal (a) may not directly benefit the individual, and (b) strengthens and deepens social connections among others in the network, facilitating opportunities for reciprocity. For example, a teacher comes in early to work with a group of students on writing personal essays for college admission. Motivated by the teachers’ example and standards of performance, after school the students share their essays, critiquing each other’s work.

2.2.3 *Testing the Effects of Relational Trust*

The definitional work on relational trust was grounded in studying the qualitative field notes and observational data collected in 12 elementary schools over a three-year period. Teams of graduate students conducted interviews with teachers, administrators, and community leaders; observed in classrooms; and attended school events including teacher and local school council meetings. The data were coded to extract key concepts that shaped an understanding of how relational trust was formed, operated in different settings, and related to principal leadership. The importance of principal leadership was further examined in the dissertation by Julie Kochanek, which resulted in the book, *Building Trust for Better Schools: Research-Based Practices* (2005). Kochanek extended the relational trust ideas, studying three new elementary schools in-depth in conjunction with teacher and principal quantitative data collected by the Consortium on Chicago School Research from 1997 to 1999. Kochanek's work applied the relational trust framework to examine the quality of principal leadership. In their interactions with teachers and parents, principals must negotiate within role sets that are characterized by a great deal of power imbalance. As a result, Kochanek found that effective principals had to delicately manage risk and vulnerability in their interactions. When teachers felt vulnerable, effective principals seemed to minimize and manage risk so as to not exacerbate already stressful situations. However, the most effective principals recognized that risk management was not akin to risk aversion—in other words, some high-risk situations are unavoidable, and require principals to help teachers navigate uncertain terrain in the interest of improving their practice, motivating students, and so forth.

Returning to the trust results, a series of quantitative analyses was also conducted from surveys of Chicago teachers from 1991–1997 and student assessment data. The first set of analyses used data from the teacher surveys to examine the association between relational trust and a series of teacher actions over time, (e.g., orientation to innovation, outreach to parents, teacher commitment, and professional community—a composite of the four factors). The empirical results were highly consistent across all four of these measures, showing that schools with strong social ties were better positioned to improve their effectiveness; those lacking such properties had a more difficult time improving in these four areas. In those schools where relational trust grew over a three-year period, positive changes were more likely to be found. Finally, taking into account changes in relational trust over time, student performance in mathematics and reading (which was weaker) improved. However, even though the analyses included performance measures over a three-year period, the results could not be construed as definitive. A more comprehensive and systematic analysis of this over a longer time period can be found in Bryk et al. (2010).

Overall, the field study and quantitative analyses suggest several organizational benefits of relational trust specific to schools. First, school reform often requires dramatic change that puts many different actors at risk, as when low-performing schools are threatened with closure. Relational trust can moderate the sense of vulnerability and uncertainty, as individual administrators, teachers, or parents are not

assumed to hold responsibility for the actions of the collective. Second, high relational trust allows for zones of discretionary decision making; for example, if teachers, parents, and students believe that the administration is acting on their behalf, they may be more willing to go along with change, reducing the costs of conflict negotiations. Third, relational trust reinforces the fulfillment of obligations and expectations (lessening the need for careful monitoring) and increases the visibility of errant actions (minimizing evading responsibilities), all of which help to strengthen opportunities for collective action. Fourth, relational trust helps sustain an ethical imperative within the school community to advance the best interests of the members—in this instance the children; thus constituting a moral resource for school improvement.

2.3 Applying Relational Trust to a High School Intervention

The relational trust work described above was based on research at the elementary level, where the argument was that teacher-student trust operates primarily through teacher-parent trust. As Goddard et al. (2001) show, at the elementary level it is hard to separate empirically the effects of teacher trust in parents from teacher trust in students. In an ideal situation of high relational trust, the teacher and parent would share the same obligations and expectations regarding the child's education. When with their child, parents would affirm and reinforce the same norms, values, and actions taken by the teacher in the classroom. However, if the teacher and parents have low levels of relational trust, parents are unlikely to be in agreement with the expectations and obligations of the teacher for themselves or their children. Similarly when the child is at school, he or she is more likely to hold the same expectations as their parents, which are in conflict with those of the teacher.

Investigating trust relationships with high school students can be especially challenging, and few studies have examined trust in high schools especially among students with their teachers (with some notable exceptions, e.g., Romero (2010); Adams et al. (2009); and Bidwell's theoretical review in 1965). Studying peer group relationships among adolescents (for which there is an extensive literature, see Brown (2004)) does not pose the same complexities as trying to understand adolescent relationships with adults outside of the family. Traditional views of adolescence argued that relationships with parents were more turbulent than in childhood. However, the more recent literature emphasizes continuity and persisting bonds with parents despite changes in the content and form of interactions with them (see Collins and Laursen (2004) on this point). Even though familial relationships may not be riddled with high degrees of conflict, there is considerable consensus that adolescence is a period of identity formation, self-confidence building, and desire for autonomy. The desire of adolescents for autonomy and control, and their perceptions of opportunities in the classroom are often mismatched with the increasing regulatory environments of secondary classrooms, where teachers and

their students follow predetermined curricular content and defined pedagogical activities. This mismatch has been shown to lead to a decline in adolescents' intrinsic motivation and interest in school (Eccles 2004).

What this means with respect to forming relational trust in schools is that adolescents, when engaging in social exchanges with their teachers, parents, and other adults, often do so from a position of more autonomy and agency than elementary students. One cannot assume that adolescents share their parents' expectations and obligations with respect to their education. Developmentally, some students actively resist school rules and negotiate with their teachers for subtle controls of classroom behaviors from grading practices to disciplinary actions (McFarland 2001, 2004). Since adolescence is a time when most youth seek autonomy, and are somewhat skeptical of the intentions of those trying to control them, this could create a predisposition to distrust—adding a level of complexity into social relations with adults.

There are other structural issues that make the formation of relational trust more challenging in high school. High schools are typically much larger than elementary schools, making it difficult to build ties with teachers, especially as schools are typically organized in departments. This means that a student could be interacting on a daily basis with as many as six different teachers in a variety of academic and non-academic venues, including extracurricular activities. A student may be able to form a relationship with a mathematics teacher that she may not be able to build as easily with her English teacher. Adding to this mix is the high school counselor who is likely to interact with as many as 200 to 500 students on topics as critical as college preparation. Trying to establish relational ties among so many students and their counselors on decisions that have high risk, such as choosing a college is undoubtedly challenging.

It is not only scope that makes the problem of establishing relational trust in high schools problematic; the fact that many teachers do not share the same cultural background as their students, especially in schools with high proportions of low-income and minority students is also problematic. Researchers find that trust is most strained in schools serving large proportions of poor students and students of color (Goddard et al. 2009). Compounding the challenges of building ties with adolescents, teachers are likely to encounter problems building ties with their parents especially if they do not share cultural norms and values. While this is also the case at the elementary level, at the high school level students are active agents along with their parents creating a different configuration of ties, allowing for greater opportunities of miscommunication, unshared norms and expectations, and actions that are viewed by only some parties as legitimate.

In elementary school trust research, the outcomes tend to focus on process issues among adults including leadership, cooperation, and instructional change. With respect to the students, the examined outcomes of high trust have for the most part been increases in achievement over time (Bryk and Schneider 2002; Goddard et al. 2009). In high schools, students are often not tested yearly so that monitoring growth in achievement from year to year is not operationally reasonable. On the other hand, one might expect that in high school the effects of higher trust would produce changes in norms and actions such as increases in the numbers of

students aspiring to attend postsecondary school and enrolling in postsecondary school. Focusing on aspirations represents one of the key components of measuring trust—shared expectations; an increase in college attendance represents the second component—obligations or actions. Consequently, when examining the relationship of trust to productivity in high school, it seems more prudent to consider such measures at the school level including graduation rates, and enrollment at two- and four-year institutions.

The evidence on relational trust and how it could potentially lead to changes in expectations and behavior became one of the primary motivations for designing an intervention that could change college enrollment rates, especially of low-income and minority students, who have the requisite knowledge and skills to attend postsecondary school, but who potentially lack the social and economic supports to realize their ambitions. As in the elementary trust research, the target for understanding relationships and how they affect norms and behaviors is organizational. Recognizing that there are particular developmental considerations among adolescents and that the organization of high schools presents another set of challenges, the decision was to begin by working through a small, embedded center designed to assist students in realizing college ambitions, taking into account variations in student knowledge and skills, familial resources, and individual preferences for different types of colleges. Rather than trying to change existing departments or school-wide practices, the motivation of the intervention was to introduce a new entity that would uniformly affirm shared expectations of college-going and promote actions to further that norm. The assumption is that the activities in this unit would produce externalities—positive social and behavioral spillovers, which are consistent with the diffusion of innovations literature (Frank et al. 2004). Results of the implementation of a specific reform at the high school level show that changes in teacher behavior are frequently facilitated by informal help and conversation between colleagues, rather than through formal, structured professional development.

2.4 What is CAP?

The College Ambition Program employs the principles of relational trust for building shared norms and obligations that result in the realization of college ambitions. The *rationale* for the activities offered by CAP was developed from the results of a major study, the Alfred P. Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development (SSYSD) that followed a cohort of over 1,000 middle and high school students into young adulthood (data collection on the longitudinal sample is continuing). SSYSD was designed to understand the adolescent experience and gathered data from 12 sites across the country. Sites were public middle and high schools located in urban, suburban, and rural communities all across the United States, and were selected to represent, in aggregate, a representative sample (socioeconomically, geographically, ethnically) of youth between the ages of 12 and 18 in the US. Data from in-person interviews, survey questionnaires, and experience sampling method (ESM) devices

were collected in four waves between 1992 and 1997, and included information from students, school personnel, families, and peer groups.

Results from this project highlighted differences in the culture of the schools that were directly tied to social supports and economic resources (ranging from per pupil expenditures to programmatic resources and college preparation activities). One of the key findings of SSYSD was that in schools with higher than average national college-going rates (based on National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] data found in the *Condition of Education* (1993a, 1995a, 1997a) and *Digest of Educational Statistics* 1993b, 1995b, 1997b), there was a college culture reinforced by teachers, counselors, administrators, students, and parents. In these schools, teachers talked about the importance of a college education in their courses even if the subject matter was arts or technical classes. Teachers also discussed steps in the college preparation process—including highlighting vocabulary words, focusing on mathematic principles that students are likely to encounter on college admission tests, and following-up with the students regarding postsecondary plans after graduation. Counselors were also directly engaged with the students, helped to frame college personal essays, wrote letters of recommendation, pointed students to resources on college programs, supplied lists of tutors for help with academic subjects, and provided lists of private consultants to assist with all aspects of the college choice process, including financial aid. Administrators coordinated a series of assemblies for parents on the process and various timelines that were critical for college admission and arranged special visits by college recruiters. The student body was its own publicity machine for college. Discussion took place in lunchrooms, study halls, and extracurricular club meetings and included such topics as who applied where, acceptance rates, college admission test score averages, and how many times to take the college admission tests and the likelihood of increasing one's score by doing so.

In schools with lower than average college attendance rates this was not the case. Teachers often struggled with keeping students in school, excessive absences, and behavioral problems; counselors' time was primarily spent on social and psychological problems of alcohol and drug addictions, unwanted pregnancies, and learning disabilities. There was limited information on college choices, admission test preparation, and financial aid (Schneider and Stevenson 1999; Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000). These results highlighted the huge social support and economic differences that plague many public high schools, especially those serving students in families with limited resources. The students and their parents expected to attain a college education, but the path for getting there was very unlike the one in more advantaged communities.

While it would be ideal to give these schools more resources, in the present economy this seemed unlikely. Moreover, the differences between these two types of schools were not just differences in economic resources. The relational ties among the students, teachers, counselors, parents, and the school were weak, and students and their parents questioned the competence and concern teachers had for the adolescents' future. The question motivating CAP became, "could the school culture be changed by focusing on the relational ties in the school community to create an environment that emphasized postsecondary attendance?" We were concerned that

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