Why Trust Matters: How Confidence in Leaders Transforms What Adolescents Gain From Youth Programs

KEYWORDS

trust, positive youth development, youth programs, developmental relationships

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DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this study was to understand how trust influences young people's experiences in youth programs. Using a theory generation methodology, the researchers explored how trust facilitates young people's thought processes, decision making, actions, and interactions. 108 youth were interviewed about how their trust in a particular program leader affected them.

The results revealed five main benefits of trust in program leaders and the processes underlying these benefits. The findings are useful for positive youth development researchers and youth programs.

METHODOLOGY

Program participants in this study answered interview questions on trust at two time points. These interviews were part of a larger study investigating positive youth development in various socio-emotional domains in the context of different youth programs. The 13 programs included in the study were all based in the United States and offered project-based programming to low-income high school-aged youth.

108 youth participated in interviews and were chosen according to a purposive quota selection. They were between the ages of 12 and 19, with an average age of 15.7. The sample consisted of 46 Latinos, 36 African Americans, 21 European Americans, and 5 youth of other ethnicities. There was a nearly equal number of females and males. Interviewers first asked youth to identify a leader (if any) whom they trusted the most, then asked three questions about how that trust influenced the youth.

Limitations of this study are that only young people's perspectives were included, with no additional data from program leaders, or about program settings or individual

differences among youth. The study also draws on a restricted sample of programs and youth, and uses exploratory methods.

KEY FINDINGS

Five benefits of young people's trust in the program leaders were identified, along with specific underlying processes that bring about each benefit. These findings are aligned with prior research. 48% of youth reported one benefit, 39% reported two benefits, 12% reported three benefits, and 1% reported four. The benefits are:

Increased use of leaders' guidance in program activities: Youth reported that trusting the leaders made them more likely to listen to and follow the leaders' suggestions. Trust also influenced them to actively engage with the leaders' advice, using it as a catalyst for their own thinking.

Increased motivation in program work: Trust in the leaders increased young people's investment in their work — it made them want to do the task and increased their confidence in their ability to do the work. Trust also acted as a protective factor against strong negative emotions, such as fear, embarrassment, or aggravation, that youth can associate with trying new things.

Use of leaders for mentoring on personal issues: Trust helped youth open up to the leaders about personal issues, which in turn facilitated their use of the leader as a sounding board or for personal advice. Young people also felt that the leader was readily available to them.

Use of leaders as a valuable model of a well-functioning relationship: By trusting the leaders, youth learned and practiced the ingredients of a good relationship, and transferred the lessons learned to other relationships, both with peers in the program and others outside the program. Youth learned the importance of opening oneself up, recognizing that not all adults are the same, and that there are caring adults in the world.

Increased experience of program cohesiveness: Significantly fewer numbers of youth reported that trust in the leader created a sense of group cohesiveness and allowed them to feel like they belonged.

Based on their research, the authors propose a model that synthesizes how the above processes unfold over time and impact youth. The model includes the following components:

- Trust in program leaders can contribute to multiple distinct beneficial processes. These may differ among youth.
- Trust in leaders often functions as an "amplifier", a factor that enables or magnifies beneficial processes.
- As trust often resembled a moderator, it is depicted in the model as an arrow influencing the relationship between leaders' assets and young

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This study explores how young people's trust in their youth program leaders positively influences their program experiences. The findings suggest that trust in leaders facilitates or acts as a "linchpin" for youth benefitting from programs.

people's active development.
- Trust most directly amplifies youth's use of the assets of leaders — their abilities, resources, and capacities for caring.
- Trust in leaders enhances youth active engagement in developmental processes.
- Trust in leaders helps open youth to beneficial experiences that they would not otherwise have.

WHY THIS MATTERS

These findings are relevant to positive youth development research, and encourage front-line practitioners to emphasize trust in their relationships with youth.

"The findings suggest a set of processes through which trust in the goodwill, integrity, and abilities of leaders can increase youth's use of leaders' expertise and lead to youth becoming more actively engaged in developmental experiences."

(Griffith & Larson, 2016, p. 799)

RECAP

Young people in various youth programs were interviewed about their trust in program leaders. Five main benefits of trust emerged, each with certain underlying processes. The authors also present a model which maps out how trust in effective leaders amplifies what young people gain from youth programs.

APA CITATION

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