Building Trust: Reflections of Adults Working with High-School-Age Youth in Project-Based Programs

"A program leader's ability to build trust with youth is critical in effective project-based programs that serve as intervention to support skill development" (p. 439).

1. What is the research about?

The aim of this study is to understand the ways in which leaders engage in trust-building with youth, from the vantage point of leaders, on which there is limited research. The study also looked at the challenges leaders faced in maintaining trust with youth from marginalized and low-income communities.

2. Where did the research take place?

The study took place in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Chicago, and Central Illinois, where researchers identified high-quality programs with low youth and staff turn-over and that focused on positive youth development in their work.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth program leaders. The study focused on 13 project-based/skill development programs (in arts, leadership, and STEM, or science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) serving low-income, working-class, and racialized high-school-age youth. Twenty-five leaders were interviewed. The sample group was primarily female; 40% had formal training in youth development and 76% had a college degree.

4. How was the research done?

Researchers used Rotenberg's BDT (base, domain, and target) framework* to understand adolescent interpersonal trust along three dimensions (p. 440):

1) What one's trust is **based** on; reliability, emotional respect, and/or honesty.

2) What the **domains** of trust are; cognitive/affective (i.e. a youth believes/feels that a leader exhibits the bases of trust), behaviour-dependent (i.e. a youth behaves in way that relies on a leader to be a person who upholds the bases of trust), and behaviour enacting (i.e. a youth engages in behaviour that demonstrates the bases of trust that they hold for a leader).

3) The **target** of the trustee's qualities; in this case, a specific youth program leader.

Since trust-building is a critical tool in project-based youth programs, it was important to researchers to highlight indicators that contribute to the trust-building process, including reliability, being receptive to disclosure, and maintaining confidentiality.

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews at four time-points over the program cycle (seven to nine months), with the focus on topics such as motivation, dilemmas faced, exercising authority, and youth-adult relationships. Leaders were asked about their relationships with each youth they worked with, and how they fostered trusting relationships generally. The study collected data from 96 transcripts by searching the word 'trust.'

*Rotenberg, K. J. (2010). The conceptualization of interpersonal trust: A basis, domain, and target framework. In K. J. Rotenberg (Ed.), *Interpersonal trust during childhood and adolescence*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

5. What are the key findings?

Researchers shared three main themes:

1) Approaches to building trust.

Researchers found leaders who respected youth – by simply talking to them like they were adults, giving them ownership of activities, embracing their skills or acknowledging their privacy – resulted in strengthened rapport. Leaders also built rapport by engaging in actions that made them more approachable – "meeting youth on their level" (p. 443) and creating a friendly environment through informal, one-on-one, personal conversations was beneficial when making new connections. Being consistent was also important to building trust because youth perceived these leaders as dependable.

Youth were able to connect with leaders who occupied a nuanced adult role in their lives and fulfilled multiple roles to support youth in their programs, including parent; friend; boss, guide or ally; teacher, coach or social worker.

2) Challenges that arise in building trust and ways to resolve these challenges.

Leaders recognized some youth entered a program with legitimate hesitation in trusting adults due to previous experiences. Program-related conflict between youth and leaders affected their ability to maintain consistent levels of trust and to balance their own needs. Trust only developed and maintained through continued interactions over time, but this could provide ample opportunity for misunderstanding, which in turn could create a challenge in the trust-building process.

3) Indicators that youth have formed or are forming trust.

One of the key indicators of trust is youth asking for assistance or feedback on work. Leaders also recognized that youth who formed trust often began asking for guidance or help in other areas of their life, too. Another indicator is when youth shared their opinions, thoughts, and/or feelings or critiques with leaders about a project. The third indicator was when youth showed a level of commitment and were willing to help with activities that benefited the program.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Youth work is centered around intentionally building trust with program participants, and this study highlights the importance of **multi-dimensional trust-building practices**, since it's a fluid process rather than a one-time event. The findings can be used to support the development of self-reflective tools that youth workers can use to analyze their interactions with young people, address challenges they face, and strengthen their relationships.

Griffith, A., & Johnson, H. (2019). Building trust: Reflections of adults working with high-school-age youth in project-based programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *96*, 439–450.

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