

## **How to Build Trust and What Is It Exactly?**

### **Successes**

University faculty and school personnel partnerships have been increasingly extolled as an important and critical feature of many school reform initiatives (Zetlin & MacLeod, 1995). In fact, researchers have argued that collaboration between university faculty and classroom teachers are central to improving teaching and learning (Arora, Kean, & Anthony, 2000; Ball, 2000; Keys & Kennedy, 1999). To date, however, our understanding of how such relationships unfold and are sustained over time is rather limited. Most research on educational partnerships has been focused on understanding the logistical and administrative strategies used by the partners to maintain working relationships (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman, & Cook, 2003; Zetlin & MacLeod, 1995). This same research has also shown that an imbalance of power existed between university and school partners despite the best attempts at parity (Tushnet, 1993). In fact, some researchers have proposed that achieving relationship parity in university and school relationships may be difficult because teachers are expected to view themselves as equals with those university scholars and researchers they view as authorities (Teitel, 1998). With that said, there have been some excellent examples of partnerships at work in science education.

For example, the University of Michigan has established a long-term partnership with the Detroit public school system and Michigan State faculty have a long-term working relationship with the Lansing public schools. These two partnerships have been held up within the science education community as potential models around which others seeking to establish collaborative partnerships. What the work has shown is that developing a collaborative partnership involves the investment of time and energy, as well as the sharing of resources, responsibility, and rewards, all of which are difficult without trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Effective collaboration creates a situation of interdependence that participants will likely avoid unless they trust their partners. Increased interdependence can foster greater trust over time, as partners have experiences with each other and have opportunities to witness the benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty and openness of their partners (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Das & Teng, 1998; Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Solomon & Flores, 2001). Putnam (1993) referred to this accumulation of collective trust as “social capital,” and treated this as a very real asset that accrues in communities whose members trust one another. This accumulation of social capital then allows for the creation of effective and functional social networks, which enable transformative action to occur within a community (Putnam, 2000).

### **Vexation**

Building trust is a necessary component in any relationship, but appears to be particularly important when university personnel attempt to partner with urban school personnel. Urban school personnel are consistently under the microscope and are frequently informed that they are working in underachieving schools, not doing their jobs and not good teachers. These messages are often delivered by university research reports. Not surprisingly, the many urban teachers that we have worked with over the past three years have had held a rather negative view of university personnel because they typically saw university personnel as using others for their own agendas.

In our work, we have come to view trust as learning process based on many factors including developing long-term relationships, having a co-evolving research agenda as opposed to an imposed agenda, and collaborating, not just cooperating with our partner teachers. At the beginning of our partnerships, we found it critically important to start all conversations with the question: “How can we help.” Following the asking of this question, we would then listen to the teachers’ needs, desires, and

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concerns before we talked and presented our projects and goals. This approach allowed us to place an emphasis on establishing trust, mutual respect, identifying mutual self-interests, and assisted in the development of a shared agenda rather than imposing our particular agenda. Then by asking ourselves what role we could play in supporting the empowerment of teachers as equals and how they could take some ownership over our curriculum and research. In doing this, we found that each relationship began with a cautiously optimistic initial period of impression-making in which the teachers, for the most part, expected us to “let them down.” However, following this period (usually lasting a year or so), it was followed by a period of risk taking and learning the meaning of trust. Following this period of uncertainty, we have found that we entered into a period of more intense exploration in which the teachers would slowly begin to question our research agenda, our curriculum materials, and begin to make suggestions for improvement and change which culminated in the blurring of our respective social identities and roles.

However, now as we begin to consider scaling our current projects the question arises how can we as university researchers develop the necessary trust relationships at a scale that is far beyond our current model? For example, we are planning on scaling our project from a core set of teachers to nearly 100 teachers and then to 100 more and so on. It is physically impossible for our research team to develop the close and tight knit relationship that we have developed with our initial cohort of teachers. Yet, if we do not develop trusting relationships with teachers how can we ensure that the feedback from teachers is genuine? We are also still trying to understand the very nature of trust? Is trust a cognitive or affective construct? Does our understanding of trust impact how we scale our program? What are effective ways to build trust that do not require hours upon hours of work alongside a single classroom teacher? Is trust development possible if that does not happen? These are just some of the questions that are driving our work and forcing us to critically evaluate our approach to working with schools and teachers.

Much of the framework for our thinking has been drawn from the management and business literature where understanding trust building between organizations, customers and businesses is of paramount importance. Within the management literature there is a great deal of talk about being a “customer-oriented” business, yet the research suggests that many companies still treat the customer as the “object” or the “target” of marketing. Solomon and Flores (2001 p. 28) have argued that such talk is wildly off the mark and ultimately self-defeating unless businesses come to understand their customers. To do this, Solomon and Flores argue that businesses should become familiar with the practices of the customers, with their needs and perspectives, and establish relationships in which trust, not dependence (which in education is often through grant funded projects) is the definitive bond. We found many of the issues facing business are the same ones that face educators when building partnerships. In fact, we feel that the science education community can benefit from the work being conducted in the fields of management and business because we believe that if educators focus on trust building we will be able to eliminate or at the very least, decrease the intellectual and social dichotomy that currently exists between university researchers and classroom teachers. However, the question we would like to discuss regarding this is even possible given the grant-funded nature of many educational partnerships to move beyond the “object” model when thinking of teachers and thinking of them more as colleagues and collaborators?