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Positive Psychology: Faculty Trust in Students and Student Voice

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Psychology researchers and practitioners have traditionally oriented the field to the rescuing of people from various mental illnesses while virtually holding no scientifically sound tools for helping people to reach their higher ground, to thrive, and flourish (Fredrickson, 2003). In 1998, Martin E.P. Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association, launched an evolution in the field when he called for a "positive psychology" emphasizing the sustaining emotions of joy, contentment, gratitude, and love as contributors to longer, healthier living. Seligman realized that psychology had largely neglected the latter two of its three pre-World War II missions: curing mental illness, helping all people lead more productive and fulfilling lives, and identifying and nurturing of high talent (Linley et.al., 2006). Interestingly, productivity and the realization of individuals' strengths are also two of the most fundamental foci of schools.

As positive emotions and healthy relationships certainly predicate balanced life perspectives and optimal performance, they are especially significant to classroom interactions and dynamics. Thus, to conceptualize the general power of positive psychology, we need an understanding of how and why good feelings and favorable perspectives matter. The purpose of this paper then, in the first section, is to provide a concise context for the domain of positive psychology as conceived by Seligman in the late 1990s. The second section works to exhibit the implications of the unconventional tenets of positive psychology on the greater dynamics of teacher trust of students and student voice. Further, Seligman introduced the construct of *learned helplessness* to convey how hopelessness and other negative thoughts and emotions can evolve into clinical depression. His premise is simple yet profound: negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and anger are counterproductive to personal actualization and fulfillment while the positive emotions of joy and love broaden attention to thinking and can lead to the discovery of novel ideas, actions, and social bonds.

There is uncertainty, however, as to what positive psychology really is and this creates challenges for its claims as a science. Linley et al. (2006) asserted that if we sought a definition from ten positive psychologists, we would get ten different answers. Nonetheless, this implies an uncertainty as to what positive psychology really is and creates a hard sell for it as a science. However, while variety exists in defining the term, practitioners uniformly agree that positive psychology is not a panacea for many modern ills. Rather, the field of positive psychology is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction as well as maintenance of hope and optimism for the future. Individually, it is about the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. As they pertain to school dynamics, the doctrines of positive psychology include a value for individual and group perspectives really lend to a culture that promotes trusting interactions between students and adults and foster opportunities for student voice.

Teacher Trust of Students

The relationships between teachers and students have become increasingly critical to the success of schools. The key to a learning partnership begins with developing students' trust in the school, faculty, curriculum, etc. Teachers are the key to developing this partnership because they spend the most time with students and are often the first line of communication between the home and the school (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001).

Trust can be defined as one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001) These factors are interrelated and contain a great deal of overlap which complicates the variable of trust further. The five facets will be outlined in more detail as they relate to faculty trust in students.

Vulnerability is a key aspect of trust because trust is relevant only in relationships of interdependence. In this type of relationship one person depends on another for something they want or need. In the age of accountability, faculty members are dependent upon students to produce on standardized assessments which directly tie into accreditation and are used as a measure of faculty proficiency. Students are dependent upon faculty members for a wide variety of needs including safety, security, and content knowledge. A relationship of high trust between students and faculty is one where a student's needs are consistently met by faculty members.

Benevolence is a key facet of trust that relates to the expression of kindness or altruism for another person. A relationship that is trusting involves people who show kindness, help each other, and do not intentionally cause harm to the other. There are numerous opportunities within a school setting to see benevolence build or break a relationship. Benevolence often requires a faculty member to go beyond the job description and support a student when they are having difficulty or take an interest in a student's non-academic talents or interests. Benevolence is often seen in high performing schools through the use of mentoring programs, student leadership groups, and service learning projects. These types of activities provide opportunities for trust building in schools.

Honesty is a facet of trust that denotes factors such as integrity, transparency, and truthfulness. The perception of honesty is typically demonstrated through a person's words and actions matching in all circumstances. Honesty is critical as teachers push students to continually improve in all academic areas. Honesty often comes in the form of constructive feedback from staff members on both the good things as well as the items for improvement on the student's part.

Openness refers to the process through which people share information, influence, and control. These can symbolize power within a relationship, and it is how this power is used that can influence trust (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Shared decision making is a strategy that can be employed in schools to develop openness. Students should be allowed to have access to decision making that most closely relates to them. Trusting relationships are built when the level of organizational openness is higher. The voluntary sharing of power in decision making with students is a critical step towards building trusting relationships.

Reliability is most closely tied to the facet of vulnerability. Reliability refers to the feeling that one person is able to depend on another in all situations. In relationships of high trust individuals are able to predict behaviors and reactions from situation to situation. This type of situational awareness can only be established over time as opportunities arise. Students often begin to take more risks in regards to academic achievement as they become more aware of a teacher's reaction. The first time a teacher belittles a student for making a mistake sets the tone for the relationship and is difficult to overcome. Student achievement is a process of trial and error with many failures on the road to success. Students must feel supported and know that teachers will reliably react favorably as they progress academically.

Competence is the final facet of trust that will be discussed. Competence refers to one's ability to meet or exceed a standard that has been set on a certain task. The level of expectations rise as a teacher determines the competence of a student. The willingness to try more complex tasks by a student rises as the teacher demonstrates their competence as an instructor.

Trust is a complex concept with many variables that are interrelated. The explanation of the facets of trust lays the groundwork for the belief that trust is not initially given and is mutually earned or lost as related to the five facets. A teacher can be very competent in their subject matter but also be unreliable in terms of reaction to student mistakes or opportunities to let students have a voice in the learning. This would inherently diminish a high trusting relationship between student and teacher.

Building Faculty Trust in Students

The concept of trust building begins with a thorough understanding of the facets of trust discussed in the previous section. Leaders must be cognizant of these facets when making decisions. The same can be said when building trust in students.

Studies related to the issue of trust lead to the conclusion that a student's sense of trust plays an important role in their school adjustment, academic motivation and performance. As a kind of school culture, trust relationships should be seriously taken into account. Schools and teachers should be conscious of how they are openly demonstrating the facets of trust to students.

Students should be active agents of their own experiences which makes their trust in teachers critical to many factors including both academic motivation and performance. Student–teacher trust relationships serve to lessen the negative feelings and events in school and help students form positive academic motivation (Birch & Ladd, 1997). These trust relationships might indirectly facilitate school performance through school adjustment and academic motivation. Trusting relationships between students and teachers also have the ability to directly promote academic performance.

Trusting relationships have been found to have a significant impact on students' academic achievement (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). It is not surprising that trust plays such a significant role in student achievement. Students excel, take risks, and achieve when they feel safe and protected from adverse consequences.

Teachers should take opportunities to not only demonstrate their competence in the subject matter but also show their willingness to know more about a student than just the material they know for an assessment. Honest, open feedback on all areas of academic achievement will also be critical to developing trusting relationships with both students and parents. One of the mistakes that teachers often make is just provided the negative feedback in regards to both academics and behavior indicators. Teachers must be conscious of the good things that students are doing and take the opportunity to recognize them in the same manner that they would recognize a mistake.

Trust is not earned easily or quickly in relationships both in and out of schools. This is true because of the complex nature of the concept. A relationship could consistently contain several factors related to trust but lack the other critical factors. An open, honest relationship will falter over time if one or more parties are not reliable or benevolent. Similarly, a relationship built on competence and reliability alone will not lead to increased academic achievement and a strong culture without honesty and openness. Schools must be cognizant of all factors related to trust as they move forward with increasing academic goals and scrutiny in regards to academic, behavior, and attendance benchmarks. This is especially true when you begin investigating the relationship of teacher trust in students as it relates to student voice.

Student Voice

When we really consider how to support students into independent responsible living as well as more accurately identify and nurture their various talents, there may be no more powerful method than simply listening to learners' perspectives and ideas about their school experiences. Yet, throughout the history of American education, schools have been places where young people are routinely subjected to the decision and policy making of adults. No element of the schooling process is exempt from broad-based adult influence. From curriculum to textbooks to bell schedules to lunch menus, adults make the choices that ultimately shape what each school day will hold for students.

As school leaders who strongly believe in the unparalleled power of student voice, we admittedly acknowledge that faculty readiness to embrace the thinking is not typically high. After all, educators are held accountable, individually and collectively, for achievement indicators, and curriculum is now so tightly prescribed to ensure coverage of identified standards that teachers have often resigned themselves to simply facilitating the content at the cost of waging classroom relationships. As in any other aspect of life productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness are all heightened through relationships that are built on trust, sharing of ideas, and when warranted negotiating terms and anticipated outcomes. Thus, strategic and earnest promotion of student voice positively impacts school-based youth-adult partnerships, citizenship and school engagement, and curriculum innovation leading to greater school affiliation, diversity of thinking, and students' self direction.

School-Based Youth-Adult Partnerships

In our unified effort to teach children, there is real power in professional partnerships, and most educators can clearly understand and value these types of relationships. Conversely, the significance of school-based youth-adult partnerships honed by the extension of a real voice to students is not as popularly received. Opposing thinking works to show a shift in values as relationships pertaining to teachers and students revert to unions based on authority and power rather than the influence so positively hailed in teacher-supervisor relationships.

Called a variety of names including student participation, active citizenship, youth leadership, and youth empowerment, the concept of student voice describes the many ways in which youth have opportunities to share in the school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Levin, 2000). Moreover, youth-adult partnerships are defined as relationships in which both youth and adults have the potential to contribute to visioning and decision making processes, to learn from one another, and to promote change (Jones & Perkins, 2004). These partnerships have the potential to create a synergy that transcends what youth or adults [can do alone], including sparking great strides in crystallizing an organization's vision and accomplishments (Mitra, 2008).

While the theoretical constructs of student voice provide a growing area of educational research, not much is known about practices that most effectively work to engage students as partners in school change. Youth-adult partnerships must develop more novel ways to communicate effectively and to learn how to work together more equitably. Dana Mitra (2008) refers to this type of partnership development as establishing communities of practice in which [students and educators] share a common concern about a problem and seek to deepen their understanding of the problem through ongoing interaction. In practice, these partnerships work well in the form of class meetings where teachers take a periodic moment away from the content to discuss general areas of classroom concern. For example, if textbooks are a required ingredient for learning and a sufficient number of students report without them, it creates an instructional disturbance for students to either leave the room to get books or move around to share with others who have them. Naturally, a teacher who settles this concern unilaterally may develop practices predicated on "if/then" or conditional circumstances. When this happens all students, including those who do what they should, are now subjected to policy and norms for which they had no role in establishing or implementing. More importantly, new practices may fail to convey why it is a classroom norm for every student to come to class prepared and how that preparation ultimately lends to teaching and learning processes.

Considering these interactions through the lenses of positive psychology, the possibility of threats or adverse consequences have been removed clearing the way meaningful dialogue about a real classroom problem and methods for resolution. The absence of such threats can transform people for the better, making them more optimistic, resilient, and socially connected (Fredrickson, 2003). Supporting Fredrickson's position, Mitra suggests that for the purposes of discussion and teambuilding meaningful roles are developed based on mutual responsibility and respect among all members including school officials; shared language and norms adopted, and joint enterprises aimed at fostering voices that have previously been silenced from decision making and knowledge-building processes (2008).

In the example of the textbooks, a classroom teacher might extend students voice through the utilization of a class meeting model in which she merely acts as a coach and secretary providing a clear and concise definition of the issue and challenging students to responsibly propose reasonable practices to address the issue. In this role, the teacher offers information when needed making comments only when necessary to keep the tone of the conversation focused and constructive. Additionally, the teacher encourages students to follow predetermined steps for problem solving, ensures every student who wishes to comment has an equitable forum to do so, and promotes critical thinking and questioning that seeks clarity. As secretary, the teacher ultimately reads the transcripts of the class meeting to include the identification of the problem, deliberation, and any proposed methods of addressing the issue. Though a simple practice, conducting periodic class meetings builds mutual engagement, knowledge creation, power sharing between adults and youth, and development of mutual respect and responsibility, the fundamental tenets of student voice. Moreover, an environment has been created in which students can see themselves as real partners in problem solving rather than creators of classroom mischief waiting to be rescued by a smart adult.

Student Voice and Curriculum Innovation

If we imagine that students only want a stake in establishing school rules and policymaking, we may actually underestimate the power of student voice as well as the depth of students' ownership of their learning experiences. The reality is that when students are in school they are not only subjected to practices and procedures that govern their behavior and interactions but also endure having what they will learn and how it will be taught determined completely absent their input. At the systemic, school, and subject level, the curriculum has tended to be something planned for and done to students (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999). As previously discussed, positive psychology defies learned helplessness through promoting individuality, self-direction, and assumption of power over our own lives. The liberal notion of authentic student participation in planning, implementing and evaluating has implications for curriculum design. In recommending significant student involvement and the valuing of student questions, input, and reflections' in curriculum making not only supports an approach to education that focuses on students' concerns in all phases of design and implementation, but also recommends that the curriculum be negotiated with and be relevant to students.

A meaningful method of soliciting student input into curriculum decisions may most assuredly be easier said than done. Realistically, most communities serve students from various academic, ethnic, economic, political, and religious backgrounds, and developing a curriculum that captures content and prescribes pedagogy that meets the needs of each group seems daunting. Add in the essential need of curricula that caters to specific learning modalities and disabilities and the task of integrating student voice into the process becomes virtually impossible. Though it may be too impractical to seek student input on what needs to be taught, there is much room to increase student voice on how the curriculum is applied. There has been a push for student choice in recent years suggesting that students are allowed to make learning selections that best align with their academic and/or personal preferences. For example, a long term project menu might include options for students to write, produce an online video, choreograph a dramatization or reenactment, or create a webpage as methods of promoting a single learning objective. Extending students privilege of choice fosters their commitment to maximize the learning opportunity through the production of quality work that they value. The autonomy of choosing supports positivity, and when people feel good, their thinking becomes more creative, integrative, flexible, and open to more information (Fredrickson, 2003).

We have addressed the limitations of student voice on the "what" as well as its benefits on the "how" of curriculum. Further, we have witnessed the strength of student voice on learning processes where teachers craft criteria and rubrics with students and negotiate assignment due dates.

Student Voice Develops Civic Values and Citizenship

Schools are certainly microcosms of the communities they represent, and as our society functions as a democracy, within logical reason so should our learning organizations. In order for a democracy to remain strong, it is imperative that its citizens have trust in government, be politically engaged and connected to their community, and value those who have differing opinions and perspectives (Morgan & Streb, 2001). However, many studies indicate that Americans fall short on these aspects of citizenship seemingly cynical of government and not believing that they hold the collective power to effect change. Comparably in most places, students feel the same about their schools. Morgan and Sreb attribute this lack of civic and school engagement to deficient self-concepts, an adversary of Seligman's positive psychology prescriptions. They acknowledge conventional educational efforts to promote confidence and creativity in young people as part of nurturing positive self concepts. Citing John Dewey, Morgan and Streb support the perspective that all genuine education comes about through experience and that a much more effective approach is to allow students to learn that they can have a positive impact on their community by actually making a difference in the community through service learning.

As was the case with student choice in the previous section, students' engagement with projects of their own design provide them with opportunities to succeed in tasks that have much greater significance than performance on formal assessments. By definition, service learning is a method of experimental education in which students apply what they learn in class to a real world situation by performing needed community service and its purpose is to promote civic education and citizenship as well as to provide a concrete learning experience for the curricular topic (Morgan & Streb, 2001).

A Final Word on Positive Psychology, Teacher Trust and Student Voice

Positive Psychology remains a newer body of research. Teacher trust and student voice most directly related to Positive Psychology through the advancement of youth development. Educators are faced with the fundamental question of how to motivate and engage youth in meaningful activities that will in turn help them develop the necessary skills to become successful adults. Teacher trust and student voice are critical components in developing problem solving skills necessary to be successful in the 21st century.

It appears that experiencing positive emotions increases the likelihood that people will feel good in the future, but positive emotions don't just transform individuals. They may also transform groups of people, within communities and organizations (Fredrickson, 2003). In schools, such transformations require commitments from students, their teachers, and administrators.

Certainly, students should be encouraged to see themselves as active participants in their schooling and not so much assume traditional roles of silent partnership. Teacher trust is a critical element that must be evident if students are to be adequately extended opportunities for voice. Through our discussion and practical recommendations we have provided a concise context for the domain of positive psychology as conceived by Seligman in the late 1990s and exhibited the implications of the unconventional tenets of positive psychology on the greater dynamics of teacher trust of students and student voice.

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