

Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis

Studia ad Didacticam Biologiae Pertinentia 11 (2021)

ISSN 2083-7276

DOI 10.24917/20837276.11.22

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Trust in the teacher – signs, difficulties, attempts to undermine it

Introduction

Trust is a difficult term to explain owing to its complexity and its presence in many scientific fields, as well as in public debate and everyday life. At the same time, it remains a particularly important concept in every area of social life. As Piotr Sztompka writes, trust is an indispensable strategy of conduct when faced with an untransparent social environment. Without it, we would become paralysed and unable to act (2007, p. 48).

Trust is also essential in the work of teachers. The professional functioning of teachers would not be possible without trust, a “two-way” trust, i.e. without the trust placed in teachers by the subjects of education: pupils, parents, colleagues or, generally speaking, members of society, and without trust placed by teachers in their pupils and their guardians.

If we assume that trust means believing in what another person says, does and decides, and believing that they are prepared to act on it (McAllister, 1995, p. 25; Lewicki, McAllister, Bies, 1998, p. 440), then in the school setting, it would mean believing in the teacher’s words – that they are true, in his/her actions – that they are right, and in his/her decisions – that they are taken for the sake of the child’s welfare.

In the 1980s, trust emerged at the forefront of sociological interest, as it was noted that everyday social life is impossible without trust (Good, 1988, p. 32). Similarly, the work of teachers would be impossible if thousands of pupils entered the school every day and thousands of parents sent their children to educational institutions without trusting the teachers. Teachers’ work is based on the relationship with the pupil, and trust is a fundamental component of all social relationships (Seligman, 1997, p. 13). Therefore, any attempt to reduce trust towards teachers is detrimental, also to the whole process of teaching and education, to the functioning of schools and other educational, care, or teaching institutions.

In this paper, the first part presents terminological considerations on the concept of trust, especially in the context of teaching activity. The need for the presence of trust in the space of teachers’ work is also highlighted.

In the further part, the article addresses the issue of attempts to reduce trust towards teachers, which does not have a positive impact on the process of teaching and education, the position and social prestige of teachers, the evaluation of the entire professional group, and the school institutions. To put it differently, all manifestations of distrust towards teachers by superiors or educational

policymakers are detrimental to the whole educational process. On the other hand, the reasons for distrust of teachers can be found in the teachers themselves. This is because their actions or inactions may cause pupils or parents to mistrust them and other educators by transferring mistrust from an individual to the whole professional group.

The need for trust in the teachers' work

One has to agree with Sztompka that to live and operate in a society which is non-transparent, full of ambiguity and uncertainty, we have to “jump into uncertainty”. We must constantly probe the surrounding world in search of those people, devices, products, institutions, ideas, which will be necessary, beneficial, useful, indispensable for us. And here trust comes in handy, which is, as Sztompka claims, a human bridge over the abyss of uncertainty, a prosthesis allowing to feel more secure in an uncertain world (2007, p. 21-22).

There is no doubt that trust is a problematic concept. The term occurs in such a variety of contexts that finding a common denominator appears to be impossible (Sprenger, 2009, p. 63).

Following Workchel (1979), the perspective in which trust is viewed can be classified into three groups:

1. The views of personality theorists who focus on individual differences in personality in terms of readiness to trust and the specific developmental and socio-contextual factors that shape this readiness. At this level, trust is conceptualised as a belief, expectation, or feeling deeply rooted in the personality that arises early in an individual's psycho-social development.
2. The views of sociologists and economists focusing on trust as an institutional phenomenon, which can be defined as the belief that interactions will continue in the future based on explicit or implicit rules and standards. At this level, trust can be defined as a phenomenon within and between institutions and as a specific phenomenon that individuals contribute to these institutions (Lewicki, Wiethoff, 2005, p. 87).
3. The views of social psychologists focusing on mutual contracts between individuals that create or destroy trust at the interpersonal and group level. Here, trust can be defined as the expectation towards the other party to the contract, the risks involved in accepting and acting on such expectations, and the contextual factors that facilitate or hinder the development and maintenance of the relationship (Lewicki, Wiethoff, 2005, p. 87).

As far as the views of sociologists are concerned, it is necessary to add a slightly different (from the one cited in the above classification) understanding of trust by them (somewhat similar to the views of social psychologists). Namely, understanding it as a basic feature of social relationships (Seligman, 1997, p. 13), as an aspect of all social interactions and all social systems (Barber, 1990, p. 133), as a universal feature in interpersonal relationships (Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984, p. 16-17).

From the point of view of personality theory in pedagogical work, it is important that the teacher as a person is capable of trusting pupils, parents, or other subjects of

educational interaction, that he/she is ready to place trust in others. If this capacity has not developed in his/her personality, it will be difficult for him/her to function as a teacher. On the other hand, if the willingness to trust others has not formed in the personality of the pupils or parents, and they display an unjustified lack of trust towards teachers, this may interfere with the education and teaching.

Trusting people tends to build lasting bonds with others, based on healthy, symmetrical principles (without achieving advantage, domination, and the desire to "win" at all costs). They tend to accept others, accept the motives that guide their actions (Ratajczak, 1988, p. 119). Therefore, such people will be better teachers because they will be able to build lasting and proper relationships with their pupils. In their relationships with others, trusting people tries to control the communication process rather than trying to control the people they interact with (Ratajczak, 1988, p. 120). A trusting teacher, therefore, will not control the pupils but will control the communication with them, and for such a teacher the aim of this communication process is to support the pupil in his/her development, in his/her work on himself/herself.

It is also important that a high level of trust promotes freedom to evade the pressure of group opinion (Ratajczak, 1988, p. 120). Consequently, trusting educators will have a greater tendency to reveal their true views and their values, which is an important aspect in the work of a teacher who is a role model for pupils morally, an example to follow.

From the sociological point of view, in order to do well in the classroom as a social group or in the school as an institution, it is necessary to trust the teacher that he/she is a competent person to teach and educate, and therefore has the knowledge and skills as well as the personality traits necessary to perform the school tasks. In addition, trust in the teacher also extends to ethical aspects – we trust that he/she is guided by moral principles, the truth, and the welfare of the pupil, that he/she respects the dignity of the pupil, his/her autonomy, that the teacher is a model of a righteous and noble, sensitive and responsible personality, that he/she keeps professional secrecy and can be entrusted with the pupil's own concerns, etc. By making such assumptions, the pupil will cooperate with the teacher, will follow her/his instructions, will comply with her/his requests. The pupil will trust the teacher unless he/she notices irregularities in his/her relationship with the teacher, because, as Hardin writes, trust is relational. One person's trust in another grows out of the relationship that the two people share. Trust is not independent of this relationship or of the agency of reputation growing out of such a relationship (Hardin, 2008, p. 554). All teachers' mistakes, all pedagogical mishaps and missteps can lead pupils (and/or parents) to stop trusting the teacher. He/She will no longer be trustworthy for them.

Viewed from a different point of view, trust can be considered in terms of trustworthiness. The differences between the various explanations of trust are mostly based on explanations of trustworthiness, although this is often implicit. Standard views of trustworthiness appear to be true for some people in some circumstances. I trust some people because I know that our relationship is in their interest, I trust others because I know they are guided by a moral obligation not to disappoint

my trust in certain matters, and I trust yet others because I think their character implies their trustworthiness. A few are particularly interested in the continuance of our relationship because they are close friends, and a very few because they love me (Hardin, 2008, p. 555). In the case of teachers, the first three reasons for trustworthiness are possible: it is in their interest to keep a good relationship with the pupil, they have a moral obligation to act for the benefit of the child, the expected character traits of the teacher as a person allow them to be seen as trustworthy.

Undermining trust in teachers

Every now and then one can hear about certain initiatives which, although they have their reasoning, cause a loss of confidence in teachers and the school as an educational institution.

In 2001, a campaign of the customs office (with the approval of the mayor and their representative for security and education) to search for drugs in pupils with the help of a Labrador retriever was carried out in the schools of Łódź (Dudzikowa, 2001, p. 91). Due to several cases of teachers distributing drugs, in some schools dogs were also sniffing around teachers, in the teachers' room, the principal's room, and the school pedagogue's room (Ręczmin, 2001, p. 2). This was a clear signal to pupils that they were not the only ones being controlled, and contained a hidden message for them to read. It was a clear message about the lack of trustworthiness and responsibility, about the questionable moral status of their own teachers and educators. For pupils, the fact that every teacher and pedagogue is checked for drugs is an important symbolic indicator that in their own school, all those people who seemingly take on the responsibility for education and upbringing cannot be trusted (Dudzikowa, 2001, p. 93). If we assume that interpersonal trust is a generalised expectation (conviction) towards another person or group, or social institution, that we can rely on their word, promise – said or written, on the intention underlying such a promise due to the fact that this person, group, or institution has the following features: intentions to behave in a credible manner, competence to fulfil them, and objective possibilities to behave in accordance with these intentions and these competences (Ratajczak, 1988, p. 115), then the situation described above undermined the credibility of teachers, as well as the school as an institution.

Sztompka cautions that when mistrust becomes a social habit, when suspicion, distrust and fear prevail which can be overcome only by extraordinary evidence that someone or something is nevertheless trustworthy – we can say that the culture of trust has disappeared from society, and a cultural syndrome of mistrust has emerged, i.e. a presumption that nobody is trustworthy unless they can prove otherwise (1996, p. 117). Teachers of pupils who have witnessed (or heard about) the activities cited above would, in order to become trustworthy again, have to provide compelling evidence that they are trustworthy. And not only on the possession (rather, non-possession) of drugs, but also on other issues. And because in school, as in business, trust transfers from the individual salesperson to the entire organisation (Sprenger, 2009, p. 40), so too can distrust towards a group of teachers extend to all educators and the entire school institution.

Another situation that resonated with the public and undermined trust towards teachers was the fitting of doorknobs in teachers' rooms only on the inside. This example is slightly different as it symbolises first and foremost a culture of distrust towards pupils, parents as 'intruders' who may disturb the peace (Dudzikowa, 2010, p.10), but subsequently causes distrust to be reciprocated. Pupils who are separated in this way, separated from the teaching community, will not trust their teachers. They will return the distrust.

As psychologist, Zofia Ratajczak, writes, an important factor that generates trust is an individual's willingness to cooperate and collaborate with others, whereas a competitive attitude creates suspicion and distrustful behaviour (1988, p. 117). Therefore, a teacher who does not seek and teach cooperation with pupils can expect a loss of trust among them.

Reinhard K. Sprenger analyses the ornaments of distrust in business, in which analogies can be found to the functioning of education and attempts to reduce trust towards teachers. Sprenger mentions, among others: anonymity of questionnaires, overemphasis on measurability ("What cannot be measured cannot be managed"), boss' control obsession, prudent protection against possible consequences of decisions, risk avoidance, ever longer meetings and deliberations, tightening of performance control (Sprenger, 2009, p. 22).

The examples of "boss control" can be found in many schools: from attendance lists (at meetings, councils, when entering the school), the obsession with paperwork and forms, the production of documents confirming development, excessive administrative tasks, to school monitoring. The school has become a bureaucratic institution where the basis for the evaluation of work is a variety of paperwork that has little to do with the actual tasks performed by the teacher. The teachers themselves feel more and more controlled, and have less and less freedom to work. The most important thing is to follow procedures, and failing to do so results in sanctions. Increasingly, teachers complain about the lack of subjectivity, they feel they are pawns shifted by educational policymakers (Zahorska, 2014, 164). Attempts to limit teachers' autonomy and thus trust towards them can be found in many decisions of educational policymakers, especially in those where there are aspirations to increase control over teachers' work. This additionally contributes to a belief in society that teachers are not trustworthy actors (Śliwerski, 2006, p. 6).

The "overemphasis on measurability" shows itself in the teacher's work – in the fact that, among other things, when assessing a pupil, the teacher has to be guided by precisely defined guidelines specified in the internal school grading system, by calculations of the average grade in electronic diaries, and – when the work is checked in external examinations – by strictly defined guidelines of the central examination body. There is increasingly less room for qualitative evaluation at school.

Teachers are increasingly obliged to "take precautions against the possible consequences of their decisions". This can be seen at the first meeting with parents after the summer holidays, when the latter are handed a pile of documents to sign: consent to use the child's image, to take part in excursions, to process personal data, consent to take responsibility for the child's unassisted return from school, from class excursions, from classes, consent to participate in extra-curricular activities, competitions, charity actions, care by the school nurse, dentist, etc.

Also “risk avoidance” i.e. abandonment of certain forms of activity, which until recently were popular because of their attractiveness, has been appearing in the work of teachers in recent years. Among others, various trips with students, “green schools”, creative and imaginative forms of activities are resigned from because of the necessity to implement the core curriculum, because of an Italian strike, or budget reductions.

The teaching profession involves some specific demands placed on representatives of this professional group, which complicate trust in them considerably. Among other things, teachers are required to be guided by moral principles, both in their professional and private life. As Hardin writes, a person who is trustworthy when they are within the reach of their community, with its standards and sanctions, may be completely untrustworthy outside that community – where its standards do not reach. This is particularly problematic in relation to trustworthiness understood as a moral or another obligation if those standards are group-specific (2008, p. 539). This is the case with teachers – they cannot afford a discrepancy between the values they proclaim and their own conduct on pain of losing trust. Indeed, the indicator of trust is the examination of the compatibility of beliefs with actions (Ratajczak, 1988, p. 115). The problem of breaching trust by teachers themselves, such as transgressing moral obligations¹, is an important issue that should be considered in the next paper².

The situations of undermining teachers’ trust presented above do not exhaust the long list of infamous examples. The consequences of all such actions (both intentional and unintentional) are always negative and result not only in the loss of teachers’ credibility, but also in the lowered prestige of the profession, a decline in social standing, a crisis of teacher authority and a decrease in the effectiveness of teaching and educational work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I shall present a fictional but possible episode from one day in the life of a pupil where the universality and necessity of trust in teachers and in school as an institution is demonstrated. This is a story modelled on the one created by Sztompka to emphasise the universality of trust in everyday aspects of social life (Sztompka, 2007, p. 13-18).

I get up at seven in the morning and pack my backpack for today’s lessons. Already at this point, I trust that the subjects planned for today are useful for me and will prepare me for life in society. Mathematics will teach me to be precise, to think logically and to draw conclusions. Learning English will allow me to communicate in the modern world, beyond national borders, as it is the most popular language in the world.

I put on the school uniform, which is a cotton T-shirt with the name of our school embroidered on it. This is what my teacher expects from me and I can’t betray her trust. In the past, our school allowed free dressing, but some pupils wore clothes with offensive words, others flaunted expensive designer clothes that not everyone could afford, and some girls showed off “too much body”, which was distasteful to others. I believe that the uniform has solved many unnecessary problems and I like to wear it every day.

1 In some countries, the big problem is sexual harassment.

2 This article focuses mainly on external attempts to undermine trust in the teacher.

For breakfast, my mother made a healthy meal: oats with nuts and raisins. Our teacher told us a lot about healthy eating, that it is important for the proper functioning of our brain, and although I would rather choose sweet cereal with milk, I eat the healthier one.

During breakfast, I repeat my multiplication tables as the teacher is about to examine us. I hope that memorizing the multiplication table will allow me to calculate things quickly in my everyday life and to do more complicated maths faster in the future. She also says that learning “by heart” trains our minds so that we can remember things that are important to us more easily. She also says that it is good to exercise the mind as often as possible. So I try to do that.

After breakfast, mum takes me to school. I go there trusting that nothing bad will happen to me, no one will hurt me even though I will be without my parents. I will spend a few hours at school, where the teacher will take care of my safety and teach me new things that will improve my development. If she rebukes or warns me, it’s only in good faith, so that I can behave properly in different life situations.

At the first lesson, a friend broke a new pen my dad had given me. During the break, I told the teacher about it, because I trust that she will help to influence my friend not to destroy my things anymore. I also trust that my teacher won’t tell anyone my secrets, so I can tell her all my worries and concerns...

This story could go on and on for a long time, but the aim is not to exhaust the subject, but to highlight the fact that trust is constantly present in school situations. Trusting the teacher is necessary to function properly as a pupil, to participate in the process of education and teaching.

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Abstract

Trust is an essential part of teacher's work. Cooperation with pupils and parents, and working together for the benefit of the child and his/her comprehensive development would be extremely burdensome, if not impossible, without trust. Believing in the truthfulness of the teacher's words, in the legitimacy of his/her actions and decisions is the basis of the school's functioning as an institution. Therefore, any attempts to limit trust towards teachers are highly detrimental to the entire educational process. The article presents perspectives of trust towards teachers and examples of various situations that undermine the credibility of teachers, which adversely affects the relationship with pupils, parents, the effectiveness of educational processes, but also the evaluation of the professional group of teachers and the school as an institution.

Key words: teacher, trust, trustworthiness, undermining trust, reducing trust

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