Learning to trust: Examining the connections between trust and capabilities friendly pedagogy through case studies from Honduras and Uganda

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Trust in others is a foundational feature of a prosperous and flourishing society and serves as the basis for collective action and cooperation. In this paper, we emphasize that trust is a *learned capacity*, one that educational efforts should attempt to cultivate among students. We provide an in-depth discussion of how trust is conceptualized, as well as how it relates to the capabilities approach in education. Drawing from qualitative data collected in Honduras and Uganda, we identify four potential ways that education can build trust: (1) teacher/student relations that emphasize shared learning; (2) peer relations that emphasize collaboration rather than competition; (3) direct engagement with the community through service projects; and (4) the incorporation of lessons about trust and community in the curriculum.

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1. Introduction

The capabilities approach is a theoretically appealing and increasingly utilized framework in international development (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1993). Rather than focusing on individuals as a means to economic growth, the capabilities approach frames development as the expansion of what a person is able to do and be. A capability is "a person's ability to do valuable acts or achieve valuable states of being" (Sen, 1993, p. 30). Development, in this framework, is about expanding people's opportunities to lead lives that they have reason to value.

A number of recent publications examine the connections between education, the capabilities approach, and social justice (DeJaeghere and Lee, 2011; Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Unterhalter, 2007; Walker and Unterhalter, 2007; Walker, 2012). A capabilities approach to education moves away from using years of schooling as a development indicator because it acknowledges that schools can reinforce social norms rather than reshape them, or even be of such low quality that little learning takes place. Walker and

Unterhalter convincingly argue that not everything "counts as education" if we wish to argue that education expands human freedoms, agency, and empowerment (2007, p. 14). More recently, Walker (2012) has explained that education "might be operationalized to form human beings who can contribute to shaping the kind of society which values human capabilities" (p. 9). Research on the types of interventions that tap the potential of education to expand opportunities for all individuals to lead lives that they have reason to value is greatly needed.

In this paper, we make the argument that an explicit goal of education, from a capabilities perspective, should be to foster trust. We describe how trust is closely related to the notion of affiliation, which is one of the central human capabilities proposed by Martha Nussbaum, a key theorist of the capabilities approach. While previous research on trust and education has largely focused on how trust can lead to more effective school environments (e.g. Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Forsyth et al., 2011), we ask, what are potential pathways by which education might foster trust? And further, what is the value in educating students to learn to trust? To answer these questions we draw on qualitative data from a study of an alternative education program in Honduras (the *Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial*, Tutorial Learning System or SAT) and a program closely related to SAT in Uganda (Preparation for Social Action or PSA). Through our case studies, we build upon Walker's insights regarding what a "capability friendly pedagogy" entails, identifying four potential pathways by which education can foster trust in others (Walker, 2012, p. 7).

2. Theoretical framework: trust as an essential goal of education from a capabilities perspective

2.1. Trust and affiliation: a capabilities perspective

In an effort to identify what individuals need to live lives that they value, Nussbaum developed a list of ten specific capabilities that she sees as central to human flourishing. These include life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; [respect for] other species; play; and control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 33–34). This list has been criticized for its universalistic stance (e.g. Biggeri, 2007; Raynor, 2007; Robeyns, 2003; Walker, 2012), and a key distinction between Sen's work and that of Nussbaum is their position vis-à-vis this list (Sen has not endorsed it). Nussbaum maintains that this list is a proposal, meant to be contested and debated (2011). We find the list to be a useful starting point for conceptualizing the requisite conditions for human flourishing, and focus here on the capability of *affiliation* given its theoretical linkages with trust.

Affiliation, according to Nussbaum (2011), means "being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, and to be able to engage in various forms of social interaction" (34). Affiliation also entails "having the bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; the ability to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 34). We argue that a prerequisite of affiliation is to trust others, and to develop trust as both an individual disposition and a shared culture.

We focus on the relationship between trust and affiliation in part because affiliation is one of two capabilities that Nussbaum has highlighted for its "distinctive architechtonic role" (2011, p. 39). Both *affiliation* and *practical reason*, explains Nussbaum, "organize and pervade the [other capabilities] in the sense that when the others are present in a form commensurate with human dignity, they are woven into them" (2011, p. 39). Given the architectonic role that affiliation and practical reason play in the capabilities approach, research that investigates and theorizes how education can support and foster these central human capabilities is needed. In this paper, we hope to contribute to an understanding of how education can foster trust and affiliation, and why it is beneficial to do so.

In focusing on the relationship between trust and affiliation, we build upon previous research that describes the ways education strengthens social ties. Studies of education programs in El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Brazil highlight strikingly similar patterns where students emphasized that one of the most important benefits of their participation was that they connected with others and formed friendships and alliances (Bartlett, 2010; Galván, 2001; Kalman, 2005; Prins, 2006; Purcell-Gates and Waterman, 2000; Stromquist, 1997). For example, in Prins's (2006) study in El Salvador, participants described how even though they were neighbors, they didn't know each other well until they began studying together. Prins points out that the program met the "human longing for affiliation" (2006, p. 21). Likewise, Raynor (2007) also suggests that affiliation is strongly linked with educational processes, drawing on data from her study of non-formal education for girls in Bangladesh. These studies did not explicitly examine trust and its role in facilitating students' new friendships and alliances. We hypothesize however, based on our empirical research and previous theoretical studies, that in developing affiliation, students learned to trust one another. More specifically, they began to rely on each other and to feel confident that their classmates would not exploit their vulnerability. To develop affiliation, or to live with and toward others and to engage in various forms of social interaction, one must trust others.

2.2. Conceptualizing trust

Scholars have described trust as the "civic lubricant of thriving societies," (Delhey et al., 2011, p. 787) and "the keystone of successful personal relations, leadership, teamwork, and effective organizations," (Forsyth et al., 2011, p. 3). The distinguished philosopher Onora O'Neill, in her Reith Lectures, stated that "each of us and every profession and every institution needs trust" (O'Neill, 2002, p. 4). Citing the scholar Niklas Luhmann, she agrees that, "a complete absence of trust would prevent [one] even getting up in the morning" (Luhman cited in O'Neill, 2002, p. 4).

Distinctions have been made between two forms of trust. The first involves a narrow circle of familiar others (our family, close friends, relatives), and has been called "particular," "thin," "personalized," or "specific trust" (Delhey et al., 2011; Putnam, 2000). The other, "thick" or "generalized" trust, refers to a phenomena that characterizes "connected, engaged, tolerant, prospering, and democratic communities" (Delhey et al., 2011, p. 787). This more general trust can be thought of as an individual orientation, and, at the collective level, as a culture. Generalized trust allows us to establish and maintain relationships with strangers.

What explains why one would trust others, particularly those whom one has no prior relationship with? Trust cannot be reduced to self-interested behavior, because there is variation in individuals' levels of trust in others, and their willingness to trust when there is little information about the other available (Delhey et al., 2011; Torche and Valenzuela, 2011; Uslaner, 2002). According to Uslaner, trust has a moral foundation:

> Most discussions of trust focus on instrumental or strategic reasons why one should trust another. If you kept your promises in the past, I should trust you. If you have not, I should not trust you... Yes, we talk of trusting specific people based upon our experience. But there is another side of trust as well that is not based on experience and this is *faith* in strangers, the belief that 'most people can be trusted' even though we can never know more than a handful of the strangers around us. And this *faith* in others is what I mean by the 'moral foundations of trust' (2002, p. 3, emphasis ours).

The notion of trust as an expression of faith has its roots in the writings of German sociologist/philosopher Georg Simmel (1858–1918). In his comprehensive review of Simmel's work on trust, Guido Möllering traces Simmel's influence in the trust literature and highlights Simmel's recognition of "a mysterious further element, a kind of faith, that is required to explain trust and grasp its unique nature" (Mollering, 2001, p. 404). For Simmel, trust represents a *force* – it is something that rational thought alone cannot explain. It is "a force that works for and through individuals, but at the same time for and through human association more generally" (Mollering, 2001, p. 405). For Simmel and Möllering, there is a "mysterious element" involved in trust, one that is likened to religious faith.

Barbara Misztal's book *Trust in Modern Societies* also discusses the important contribution of Simmel (pp. 49–54) and other key social theorists (1996). More recently, Misztal has examined the connections between trust and vulnerability (2011). Misztal, summarizing the well-regarded definitions of trust that appear in the literature, argues that "the majority of definitions of trust refer to it as a confidence that partners will not exploit each other's vulnerability" (2011, p. 362). Citing Rousseau et al. (1998, p. 395) she supports the claim that "at the core of trust is the 'intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions of the behavior of another'" (Misztal, 2011, p. 362). The notion of vulnerability, also a complex concept, at its most basic level refers to the human capability of being wounded,