GOVERNING COMPLEX EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Trust and Education

The Hague University of Applied Sciences
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7 December 2015

CONFERENCE SUMMARY

Co-hosted by the Dutch Ministry of Education, The Hague University of Applied Sciences and the OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), this one-day seminar brought together state of the art research with country experiences and examples of building, maintaining, and restoring trust in education. The main themes included the challenges for today’s education systems arising from trust issues, the strategies employed to tackle breakdowns in trust and their effectiveness, and what education systems can contribute to trust development among individuals and in institutions. All presentations and background papers from the meeting can be found at http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/gces.

Opening session

The meeting was opened by member of the Executive Board at The Hague University of Applied Sciences Susana Menéndez, the Director of the Knowledge Department at the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science Anne-Marie Sipkes and the Director of the Education and Skills Directorate at the OECD Andreas Schleicher.

The speakers were introduced by Henno Theisens (The Hague University of Applied Sciences), who chaired the day's events.

In the first opening address Ms. Menéndez welcomed the participants and emphasised the significance of collaboration between research and policy such as this conference. She emphasised the rapidly growing importance of research in education policy making and described The Hague University of Applied Sciences in a very good position to contribute to policy challenges as key strengths of the school are its scientific rigor and problem oriented research. She highlighted the importance of trust in collaboration and accountability as key challenges in education policy.

In the following speech, Anne-Marie Sipkes emphasised trust as an important precondition for accountability and capacity building as well as trust being crucial for different actors to act as equal
partners. Building a shared culture in which trust can flourish is a difficult task – while trust is hard to gain, it is easy to lose. Trust in education is a very relevant and current issue in Dutch education where growing distrust can be observed, raising the question how to restore trust in a complex system such as the Dutch education system. This is particularly important as trust is essential for social and economic well-being and social cohesion.

Andreas Schleicher gave his opening address to the participants by video. Mr. Schleicher stated that trust as required for good governance, but that still little is known about how trust is developed and restored if broken. Education appears to be one of the major levers affecting trust, as it can help build the cognitive capacities for deciding whether to trust a person or an institution, for example. However, the education of parents remains a powerful factor, suggesting that higher trust in people with higher economic and social advantage exists at least partially because the system is structured to work for those already in it. More can thus be done to reduce inequity on all levels and there are a number of ways in which education can play a role. He closed with expressing that trust is essential to good education governance and that this valuable set of discussions will help further clarify the role education can play in developing and reinforcing legitimate trust towards people and institutions.

First keynote address

The first keynote address was delivered by Bo Rothstein, Universities of Gothenburg and Oxford, entitled “Trust, Social Capital and Human Capital”. The presentation focused on explaining the significant variation in trust levels across and within countries. More specifically, it examined the nexus of education, social trust and quality of government (i.e. the trustworthy, reliable, impartial, competent, non-corrupt, non-discriminatory government institutions). The main question was about explaining the large variation in corruption.

The first part of the presentation focused on the link between corruption and mass education. In Europe, reforms introducing mass education took place in the mid-19th century and signified a decisive break with the past’s medieval and early modern education, which was only accessible for the elites. Countries that lost wars, such as Prussia, wanted to create loyal citizens who identified with the state rather than disloyal peasants (“Making Frenchmen out of peasants”). Public education was a new universalism, applicable to all groups in society and served a variety of social needs. These first equality-enhancing reforms were about creating trust between citizens and between citizens and the state. However, the reforms were not implemented to the same extent across regions, which led to significant regional differences that are still visible in the present for instance, in Italy.

Mr Rothstein then explored the question why education had a positive impact on trust in some societies but not others. Most surveys only measure education in terms of the amount of time spent the system (i.e., levels of achievement), but not the quality of education. So there might be corruption prevalent in the local public school system as education is a public policy that is very
vulnerable to bad implementation – it entails a process where possibilities to do wrong things are almost endless. For instance, in Eastern Europe, 59 percent of population perceived education to be corrupt or extremely corrupt. This was manifested in unregistered and unlicensed (shadow) schools, teacher absenteeism, ghost teachers, bribery as well as the misuse of funds, nepotism and private tutoring. Corruption in education would then rather decrease instead of increase trust in the long-term.

The second part of the presentation examined the link between education and social trust. Bo Rothstein argued that education in general spurred social trust, but not everywhere. Negligible or slightly negative associations are found several countries, including Serbia, Turkey, Hungary, the Slovak Republic, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Ukraine and Ireland. At low values of the quality of government, the probability of generalised trust was low, irrespective of the educational level attained. But wherever the quality of government was at a high level, more than 50 percent of people displayed social trust.

In the third part of the presentation, Bo Rothstein further considered how someone with a post-tertiary education in a low quality of government country would only be about 42 percent more likely to trust others, but the percentage would increase to 66 percent in high quality of government countries (regional differences also exist within countries themselves). People often use heuristics when defining their attitude about social trust and made moral evaluations of the society in which they lived. Experience with local public servants would be such a heuristic that could inform evaluation of trust in people in general. Based on natural experiments in Denmark, immigrants who felt they were treated fairly by Danish authorities perceived society as fairer than those immigrants who did not. Hence having experienced fair teachers and principals had a stronger impact on trust than parental socialisation of values for first and second generation immigrants. In a similar vein, people who considered the system to be incompetent, inefficient and unfair in treating people equally supported lower taxes and less public spending. The quality of government explained the most variation in trust levels across and within countries.

Discussion

The audience then raised a number of questions. One participant asked in which ways low-trusting countries and regions could increase their trust levels. Mr Rothstein responded that this was a difficult question, but a forthcoming Swedish report on making development policy work would address some of the factors for this variation. In general, institutional devices or instruments – as opposed structures – were important because they were man-made and could be changed.

The question was then posed which new approaches to research could help analysing better the trust determinants such as causality. Bo Rothstein replied that society could be seen metaphorically as a bridge, in that even if the driveway made up 95 percent of the bridge, the cement connecting the elements of the bridge must not be disregarded. Contrary to common belief, trustworthy behaviour and integrity of politicians did matter, and could be effective levers to improve government.
The second keynote address entitled “Leadership, Professionalism and Overcoming Distrust” was delivered by Megan Tschannen-Moran, Professor of Educational Leadership at the College of William and Mary, USA. Introducing the functions and characteristics of trust, Ms Tschannen-Moran described the main issues of how trust matters for education: Trust is associated with the double function of acting as a glue, providing social cohesion in society and organisation by fostering robust relationships, as well as a lubricant for social interactions in that trust can reduce costs of negotiation and frees energy otherwise tied up in individuals constantly being watchful of others.

Trust is also described as a choice, enabling individuals to take a leap of faith based on the trust in the relationship, making reliable decisions beyond available evidence. Trust is also related to social capital as it provides real benefits to those in a network of high trust relationships. In these functions trust can foster student achievement and it should be noted that a trusting teacher-student relationship can promote the transmission of values, where the teacher can act as a trusted bridge between society’s values and norms and the student. Ms Tschannen-Moran described further that trust was found crucial for student achievement, and that the effect of trust in the teacher-student relationship was also unrelated to the socio-economic status of the student.

Today’s education systems face a number of challenges related to trust. Firstly, comparing it to air, Ms Tschannen-Moran described trust as often first noticed when it is missing, making it difficult to raise awareness for the importance of maintaining trust. Secondly, there is evidence for an in-group and out-group bias related to how people extend trust. In contrast to an individual’s outgroup, a person’s in-group comprises people said person can easily relate to and consequently readily extends trust towards them. The difference in willingness to extend trust becomes more important with the increasing diversity of classrooms and societies – here education can contribute by highlighting the common norms, behaviours and assumptions across diverse individuals; by changing the perceptions of in-group and out-group.

Ms Tschannen-Moran continued that the structural set-up of an organisation can be a factor of general levels of trust. Based on experimental evidence she described that subordinates can be trusted less solely based on their standing in a hierarchy rather than on their individual characteristics, making a strong case for professional organisational structure with little hierarchy.

In a professional organisational structure, the task of leaders is then to provide the professionals with support to exert their function and build respective capacities through professional development and coaching. Professional structure further builds on common norms and ethics, adaptive discretion in service of students and stakeholders as well as reflective scrutiny and reflection. In strictly hierarchical organisations, on the other hand, educators and schools display behaviours of passivity as they are used to their actions being other-directed.
Importantly, trust was described as being not a simple question of increase, but finding an optimal level. The “golden mean” of trust is prudent, measured and conditional. With this goal in mind, governance needs to create the conditions to facilitate the growth of trust.

**The Governing Complex Education Systems (GCES) project**

Tracey Burns (OECD/CERI) presented the GCES project and outputs. She highlighted the three main themes of the GCES project – accountability, capacity-building and strategic thinking – underlying all outputs (thematic conferences, case studies and working papers) and the special role trust plays in each of these. All project materials, including publications and conferences, can be found on the project website: [www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/gces](http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/gces).

Ms Burns went over the programme for the afternoon and reminded the participants that the three questions of the day were:

1. What are the main challenges for today’s education systems arising from trust issues?
2. Which strategies have decision makers applied to tackle breakdowns in trust?
3. How can education contribute to trust development among individuals and institutions?

**World Café**

The afternoon portion of the conference started with a workshop format called World Café that revolved around two-round discussions on different topics assigned to individual tables. Each of the six tables was assigned a topic related to trust. World Cafés are a discussion format that helps to have collaborative conversations in small groups. The liveliness of the discussions is helped by setting up open and creative dialogue in a casual café atmosphere. By connecting people’s knowledge, new comprehension can be generated, leading to common ground and collective knowledge.

The World Café setting sparked a lively discussion on each of the tables. Topics covered included:

**Accountability** – Are there accountability mechanisms that respect and nurture trust?

**Bullying/school safety** – What can actors at all levels do to ensure an atmosphere of trust and respect in which life at school thrives?

**Communication** – How can schools communicate, with parents and the wider community, in such a way that this trust is maintained and further develops.

**Conflict** – How can we settle conflicts between different interests in ways that do not lead to a trust breakdown?
Media – How can trust in schooling be maintained in an environment where incidents are constantly broadcast?

Professionalism – How is trust related to the professionalism of teachers?

Risks – How can we generate the kind of trust that is necessary for teachers and school leaders to feel safe enough to take risks and for schools to innovate?

Workshops

The following session comprised three parallel workshops, which participants had to choose between. They are outlined in turn below.

Workshop A – When trust breaks down: country examples

**Lucie Cerna** (OECD) led this workshop. **Miekatrien Sterck** (Department of Education and Training, Flanders), **Frode Nyhamn** (Directorate for Education and Training, Norway) and **Rien Rouw** (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Netherlands) provided lead inputs.

Each of the lead inputs presented a trust brief based on their country’s experience, which provided an example of how trust broke down (particularly in relation to reform), how trust was restored, and suggestions for how it might be sustained in the longer term. The Flemish case revolved around the 2011 pension reform, which abolished a fixed minimum age for teachers, as well as the right for early retirement for teachers born after 1958. This caused dissent within the coalition government and discontent of unions. Together with different perspectives of unions and government, the reform contributed to a breakdown in trust. Several efforts were undertaken to restore trust. These included engaging in intensive formal and informal negotiations with the social partners (both formal and informal), explaining the reform from a different perspective than financial advantages, and greater deliberation regarding teachers’ careers and expectations. It was important to negotiate with the main stakeholders and to implement a stepwise approach to the reform.

Norway’s case discussed the introduction and adjustment of national tests in the education system since 2004. The main discussions were about how to increase accountability and transparency in an education system traditionally marked by a high level of trust and decentralisation. The trust in schools and teachers was first questioned after the 2001 PISA shock. The discourse ultimately led up to a breakdown in trust in 2014, with teachers going on strike about working conditions multiple times, accompanied by debates about trust and accountability and expression of the underlying dissatisfaction. Among the strategies to restore trust are increasing communication between stakeholders, building networks (supplemented by external resources), engaging in real cooperation and introducing a phased implementation as part of a learning mechanism.

The Dutch case covered the breakdown in trust between teachers and policy-makers and politicians after the government had proposed several reforms which perceived to have undue negative effects on teachers. In the spring of 2012 this resulted in two extensive teacher strikes, which were directed...
at the government. Among the efforts made to restore trust between the stakeholders were richer and more collaborative discourse, a national agreement on education, more collaborative policy-making, as well as investing in teachers’ professional development and raising their salaries.

An interesting discussion followed about how to avoid a trust breakdown in the first place, which policies may be effective once a breakdown occurs, and how to think strategically about education policies under constraints of shorter political cycles. Especially the question of balancing accountability and trust sparked a stimulating debate. For instance, more inspections can lead to greater trust if they are conceived as a professional development effort by the main stakeholders.

**Workshop B: Building Trust through Education**

**Tracey Burns** (OECD/CERI) chaired this workshop and also delivered the first lead input. Lead input was also provided by **Megan Tschannen-Morgan** (U of William and Mary, USA).

In her input Ms Burns gave an overview of a recently published OECD working paper, entitled *The Educational Roots of Trust* (Borgonovi and Burns, 2015). Using PIAAC as a data source, this paper argues that education strengthens the cognitive and analytical capacities needed to develop, maintain, and (perhaps) restore trust in both close relationships as well as in anonymous others. It does so both directly, through building and reinforcing literacy and numeracy in individuals, and indirectly, through facilitating habits and reinforcing behaviours such as reading and writing at home and at work. Education and trust are thus fundamentally intertwined and dependent on each other. While all countries across the OECD have been striving to improve their education systems in terms of student achievement levels, this research suggests that there are also concrete elements that could be usefully addressed in order to reinforce and strengthen trust.

In her lead input, Ms Tschannen-Morgan gave two concrete examples of techniques that help develop trust in educational settings. The first, appreciative inquiry, allows for an analysis of a situation or a challenge in a positive, non-threatening way. This means, for example, that instead of a starting point being a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, it could be a SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations and resources) analysis. This sets the stage for a positive and appreciative exchange between actors and can help build trust by avoiding blame or defensiveness. The second example provided was through techniques to build empathy, which allows for each partner in an exchange to better take the perspective of the other. Both of these techniques are used to build and maintain trust in a variety of educational settings.

A lively discussion ensued on the relationship between education and trust. While the importance of trust is widely acknowledged and higher trust is related to higher education, as of yet there is no consensus on the mechanisms underlying this relationship. There are also a number of systemic factors: tensions between trust and accountability, for example, or teacher professionalism, that make it difficult to tease apart the various elements involved. Does one need to trust to be trusted, for example? Or does one need to earn trust? A broad ranging discussion on the role of core values, link to attachment theory, and kinds of trust ensued. One of the preoccupations of the workshop
discussion was equity, given the data that demonstrate that individuals from more disadvantaged backgrounds tend to trust less. How can they be encouraged to trust more? How can we reduce differences in trust between groups (and the lines that are drawn between in-group vs. out-group) which can occur even within one particular school or community?

Other challenges discussed included the difficulty in finding room in the curriculum to address these issues, and the worry that conservatism might be inherent to the sector (much like many other public sectors) which would slow the process of change. The role of social and emotional skills was clearly important in building and maintaining trust, and was also highlighted as an element that would need to be included in the modern curriculum.

Workshop C – Flipping the system

In this workshop, René Kneyber (Oosterlicht College, The Netherlands) and Jelmer Evers (UniC School, The Netherlands) introduced their book “Flip the System: Changing Education from the Ground Up” to the participants and gave a presentation of the main issues covered. The book criticizes the attempts to raise educational achievement through the use of top-down policy reforms. The authors instead advocate putting teachers in the centre by providing opportunities and support to teachers for their involvement in policy making. Collaboration between practitioners and policy makers should be the centrepiece to increasing educational quality. An important role in this is the active involvement of teachers to move towards collective autonomy by setting the standards for the profession, opening up the classroom and engaging in collaboration.

In the following discussion Mr Elvers emphasized that putting teachers into the centre of education policy also requires teachers to take responsibility and move away from the passive role to which teachers have become accustomed. According to Mr Kneyber and Mr Elvers this acquired passivity is one of the major difficulties in getting the teaching profession’s support for taking a more active role in education policy. Curriculum design and subject teaching as well as the involvement of teachers’ unions and subject organizations are key elements to encourage teachers to take on more dynamic roles in education policy.

Closing performance and adieux

The meeting closed with a performance and presentation by Merlijn Twaalfhoven, a composer working in conflict areas, unconventional locations as well as in concert halls. He presented his experiences in different parts of the world of working on trust through the medium of music. He engaged the audience in a musical experience intended to convey the importance of trust. It was an innovative way to end a rich and fruitful day.

Henno Theisens (The Hague University of Applied Sciences) summarised the lessons learned throughout the conference. He thanked the participants and the OECD and the GCES project for making this conference such a success, and wished everyone a safe trip home.