

## Creating urban classroom communities worthy of trust

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### **Abstract:**

Developing trusting relationships between teachers and students in urban secondary schools everywhere is a challenging task that is essential to maintaining an effective learning environment. Trust involves a fragile web of relationships nurtured through positive daily interactions. We examined strategies that US urban high school teachers used to encourage hard-to-teach students to comply with school and class rules and engage in learning. Based on recommendations of these alienated students, we interviewed 18 teachers and observed four of their classes regularly for 4 months. We examine themes supporting an emerging theoretical framework of educational trust. Teachers encouraged their marginalized students to participate in learning by creating a curriculum and class environment that permitted many opportunities for engagement, provided positive interactions, encouraged the development of shared curriculum, and fostered student ownership. These features provided the foundation for educational trust based on themes of shared expectations, persistence, commitment, and voice.

### **Article:**

Trust appears to be a commodity in short supply in many urban schools in the USA. Whether trust is defined as 'a firm belief or confidence in the honesty, integrity, reliability, and justice of another person', or as in the older definition of the verb trust, 'to hope for' (*Webster's New World Dictionary* (Guralnik 1996: 1527)), neither parents, students nor educators appear to have much trust or hope that US urban schools are adequately educating the students they serve. A US Department of Education report (Lippman *et al.* 1996) confirms that urban public schools enroll a much higher proportion of low-income students (30%) than suburban schools (13%). Low-income urban students in the USA are more likely to be of African or Hispanic heritage and bring to school a higher than average family instability, poor health, and limited English proficiency. When the variables of income and location are held constant, however, US urban students *still* face unique educational challenges associated with student background (higher incidence of single-parent families and frequent school mobility), factors affecting the quality of school experiences (difficulty hiring qualified teachers, low teacher control over curriculum, inadequate classroom discipline, more frequent student possession of weapons, and higher incidence of student pregnancy), and other related outcomes (lower school- completion rates, and poverty and unemployment of young adults). The report concludes that many low-income students of colour encounter major obstacles to educational effectiveness when attending urban public schools (Lippman *et al.* 1996).

Some urban school educators point to these factors as reasons why students do not or cannot learn (Knapp 1995). Others identify ineffective school practices and lack of a relevant, meaningful curriculum as causes of low student achievement (Ladson-Billings 1994, Knapp 1995, Byrd *et al.* 1996, Newburg and Sims 1996). Although curricular materials, facilities and competent teachers are necessary for student achievement in urban schools, another essential factor is the development of classroom communities worthy of student *trust*.

We examined urban high school students', teachers' and administrators' perceptions of curricula and teaching that enhanced the learning of disruptive and disengaged students. We focus on understanding the strategies

teachers used to encourage difficult students to engage in the joint construction of meaningful learning experiences. Teachers described how they used shared experiences to foster trusting relationships with difficult students. We asked the question, 'How did these urban high school teachers build trusting relationships that encouraged disengaged and disruptive students to participate in classroom activities, comply with class procedures and engage with content?' We examined issues related to educational trust that may help educators build better connections among themselves, their curriculum and their most challenging students.

### **Theoretical framework: building trusting communities**

Under the most ideal circumstances, trust is not easily acquired or bestowed. Baier (1994) suggests that at its most elementary level trust is understood as a reliance on another's competence and willingness to fulfill expectations. Developing a climate of trust involves explicitness, consciousness and voluntarism that distinguishes a trusted person from a casual acquaintance. Although trust can be unwanted when it is given without being invited or welcomed, it is usually bestowed more purposefully and received through a verbal conversation or dialogue. As such, it is a conscious decision, the depth of which may vary according to the risk or vulnerability of the trusting person. Baier contends that when people trust, they open themselves to vulnerability, revealing or placing in another's care something they value, such as a prized possession, a vulnerable part of themselves, or, in the case of parents, a child. At times, people consciously place this valued possession in a closeness with others who have power to harm. There is both an acceptance of risk and, when the decision is carefully considered, an awareness that the risk is a relatively good or safe risk. Usually, the decision is made following an evaluation of the situation and the acknowledgment of what might be gained or lost from this willingness to take risks.

Parents, for example, entrust the school with their children, voluntarily bestowing trust and discretionary power on administrators and teachers as trustees. The climate of trust developed in this relationship, and every trusting relationship, is affected by the trusting persons' satisfaction with past experiences and the length of time in which parties have been involved in a trusting association. One begins to expect trust based on an awareness of historical traditions or customs, the policies and procedures established to guide decisions, and the level of safety and care that are part of a promise or contract. Similarly, the fact that many trusting relationships are voluntary and created within a just environment contributes to the level of expectations both parties have for a positive outcome (Baier 1994).

Baier (1994) further offers an explanation of 'antitrust'<sup>1</sup> or distrust, defined as the fear or intimidation that can occur when trusting relationships do not exist or have broken down. Individuals who do not work in an environment of mutual trust are often forced to rely on unequal power positions in which one controls or forces another to fulfill a contract. In these circumstances, the magnitude of distrust is defined by the severity of the consequences and the level of fear and intimidation. When power positions are unequal among trusting persons, less powerful parties must be vigilant for breaches of justice, resulting in what Baier (1994: 120) describes as 'watchful distrust' or 'judicious untrustworthiness'. Past experiences, customs and prejudices often foster expectations of distrust and a reluctance to entrust persons cared for to the control of another. In educational environments in which trust is limited, consequences such as grades, detentions and suspensions are used to fulfill the contracts between society and school, teacher and parent, and teacher and child. The reluctance to trust often leads to the unravelling of the goodwill that serves as the foundation for a learning community. This unravelling can have serious consequences in educational institutions, such as declines in achievement and increases in student disruptions and violence. Often it is not until these events erode educational quality that educators realize the extent to which teaching and learning is built on a foundation of trust.

Although most trusting relationships between students and between students and their teachers typically begin slowly and develop gradually over time, they can be shaken quite easily by a single act, and perhaps are more difficult to rebuild than to create initially. White (1995: 233) describes the elements of risk and commitment necessary to develop trusting relationships:

Trust involves the belief that you can rely on someone (specifically, their beliefs, dispositions, motives, goodwill) or something (an institution or a piece of equipment) where there is a greater or lesser element of risk. One may or may not be conscious of the trust relationship and it will involve varying degrees of personal commitment.

Efforts to establish trust need to be made early in the relationship to 'create a context of feeling and commitment in which both participants feel safe to offer up their beliefs, and the experiences, or feelings that accompany them ...' (Burbules 1993: 37).

Schools are central places in which children and adolescents learn to reach beyond early conceptualizations of family trust to initiate trusting relationships with classmates and teachers. Unfortunately, growing numbers of students are entering schools without having had positive, prior experiences with familial trust. Instead, their most cogent experiences are with distrust (Heath and McLaughlin 1993, White 1995) or antitrust (Baier 1994). Like those students who have not experienced caring relationships (Noddings 1992), distrustful students may have difficulty initiating and reciprocating trust within classroom communities.

White (1995: 233) asserts that, in addition to providing students with a safe place in which to form trusting relationships, the school 'has a major role to play in helping students to become more trustworthy, to learn to trust others, and to have proper trust and distrust of institutions'. Although this is no small task in environments in which students have a history of dependable trusting experiences, it is exceptionally challenging to create in situations where this history is limited or does not exist. Trusting environments are best created in classrooms in which students and teachers can work co-operatively over an extended time-period to construct trusting relationships. This reciprocal process is based on respect and acknowledgement of the competence and authenticity of the other (Hoy and Kupersmith 1985). Trusting relationships or trustworthiness are nurtured within sustained, long-term interactions, such as those occurring when teachers and students remain together for longer than 1 year (Noddings 1993). Certainly, the choice to remain together should be mutual, such as those relationships fostered by mentors and athletic coaches.

Although there may be a tendency to think of trust as a peripheral aspect of the school environment, we contend herein that trust is, or should be, at the centre of the school experience. It should be a planned, essential curricular component modelled by adults, infused in curricular activities, and explicitly defined and taught as a building block to positive, successful life- interactions and experiences. Trusting relationships appear to be the first step in expanding and extending students' experiences. Trust as a mutual agreement then paves the way for positive outcomes consistent with a wide range of curricular goals.

Perhaps it is most difficult to develop trusting relationships with disruptive and disengaged students in urban public high schools (Ennis 1995, 1996, MacGrath 1998). These students often bring histories of discrimination, abuse and violence that inflame feelings of distrust. Their behaviours can be interpreted as reactions to prior and ongoing treatment in schools and in society. Thus, to forge a community worthy of *their* trust requires teachers who are both sufficiently skilled in designing curriculum, presenting content and managing classes effectively (Noddings 1993), and also capable of understanding and empathizing with these students' life histories (Nieto 1994).

Building trusting communities requires teachers willing to reconstruct the traditional curriculum to address alienated and marginalized students' needs and concerns. These relationships are forged from perspectives that engender care within the construct of relational knowing (Hollingsworth *et al.* 1993). Hollingsworth *et al.* suggest that teachers' ability to teach content meaningfully relies in part on being '*in-relation*' with students. Teaching from this perspective is a personal and emotional process that creates a web of trust through the relational interactions between two persons. These interdependent, symbiotic interactions contribute significantly to the development of relationships constructed as webs of interlocking, multi-faceted strands of trust (Baier 1994). Baier emphasizes, however, that even a seemingly strong, resilient web of trust is composed of

fragile, easily violated understandings. Disruptions to one part of the web can cause the entire entity to collapse, necessitating a painful, lengthy rebuilding.

In other words, creating webs or communities of trust in urban schools is a complex, risky endeavour built on mutual expectations for goodwill nurtured over long time-periods. It involves an internal level of justice and fairness that cannot be built on negative consequences, threats or fear of intimidation. Although existing research has focused on the nature of relevant, meaningful curricula critical to engaging learners in urban schools, this work has not explicitly explored how teachers go about developing a community of trust as an explicit element of their curriculum. In this study, we examined the fragile framework of educational trust created by teachers and their students in one US urban school.

### **The inquiry process**

Our study was conducted using an interpretive, qualitative methodology in order to understand effective teaching environments for disruptive and disengaged students in urban schools. We had been working at Lincoln High School<sup>2</sup> in eastern USA during the 1997-1998 school year. One of us was a newly-hired teacher with 14 years of experience in urban high schools; the other was a university teacher who received permission for pre-service teachers to observe and teach classes in the school. We were involved equally in the study, conducting interviews and observing classes as they fitted into our schedules. Lincoln High School contained 1200 students, 90% of whom were African-American. Forty per cent of the students received free or reduced-cost lunch.<sup>3</sup> Initially, the number and degree of disruptive and disengaged behaviours observed in the halls and classrooms had surprised us. Yet, some classrooms were remarkably free of disruptions. Conversations with chronically difficult students suggested they were willing to co-operate and learn in some classrooms.

After discussions with administrators about this phenomenon, we began by interviewing 98 students that administrators identified as 'hard to teach', 'disruptive' or 'disengaged'. These students ranged in age from 14-18; 95% were African-American and 5% were White. Sixty per cent of these students qualified for free or reduced-cost lunches and 6% were enrolled in the 'success' programme for students with behaviour problems or those who were at risk to fail academically (Pianta and Walsh 1996). All but one of the students were male, and four had been incarcerated and were currently on probation. Forty per cent of the students described themselves as disruptive, while the remainder explained that school was boring and that they were not interested in participating. Most students reported they did not care about grades. They attended school because it was required by parents or because they enjoyed visiting with their friends.<sup>4</sup>

In their interviews, many students identified teachers they said they 'liked' or who they said could 'teach me'. We report findings from interviews with these teachers and selected interviews with 'hard-to-teach' students. We were particularly interested in the strategies teachers used that both they and students indicated assisted difficult students to engage. Each of the teachers agreed to be interviewed and four invited us to observe their classes. In 50-75-minute interviews, teachers discussed problems associated with teaching difficult students and provided concrete examples of tasks and procedures they found effective with their students. Teachers taught in eight different subject areas: science, English, social studies, mathematics, business, art, health education, and physical education. Twelve teachers were female and six were male; six were African-American and 12 were White. Eight teachers had more than 20 years of experience; six had between 5-16 years, while four were first-year teachers.

We began the data-collection with teacher interviews and later accepted four teachers' invitations to observe their classes. We interviewed teachers in their classrooms during one or two planning periods. We constructed interview questions using an interview guide format (Patton 1990) and audio-taped and transcribed the interviews each day. Interview questions focused first on characteristics of students that teachers associated with particular problems in the learning environment. Teachers used terms such as 'disruptive' and 'disengaged' to classify these students in their classes. We followed this introductory part of the interview by asking teachers how they connected with these students and enticed them to engage in learning. Teachers were

asked to read and comment on the interview transcripts and class descriptions and add comments regarding the purpose of tasks and their impressions of the outcome of a task or lesson.

Although there were 18 teachers interviewed for the study, four teachers, Jim Andrews, Michelle Connors, Sara Davenport and Juanita Owens, invited us to visit their classrooms and observe the class environment. We visited each class twice each week for 4 months. Jim Andrews had taught English literature for 12 years. He described himself as a former 'marine sergeant-type teacher' who had learned gradually to connect more personally with his students. Michelle Connors was a science teacher assigned by her principal to teach the students 'who had failed in everyone else's class'. Over her 16 years of experience, she had won several regional and state awards for her teaching. Sara Davenport had recently won the state 'teacher of the year' award in physical education. She described her efforts over her 15-year career to connect personally with students and create an educationally-based physical education programme. Juanita Owens had taught business education at Lincoln High School for 27 years. Her students described her as a 'very tough', demanding teacher who 'made' students learn.

Data from the observations and interviews were analysed using constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Teacher- and student-interview responses were used to elaborate rationales for behaviours observed and to identify additional situations participants perceived to be meaningful. Because teachers and students talked to us in confidence, we did not share the specifics of their interviews with others. We compared findings across participant groups and subjects to identify relevant themes (Goetz and LeCompte 1984). Over the course of the data-collection period, we reviewed data together weekly to develop and examine emerging themes.

As themes elaborating the nature of trusting communities emerged, we organized and reorganized the interview and observation data to support and challenge these themes. Sub-themes associated with vulnerability to risk, enhancing expectations for self through positive reinforcement, and trusting students to make positive decisions instrumental to their education, emerged to clarify and elaborate the procedures involved in creating trusting communities. We found examples associated with participants' past experiences of failure and distrust that made the creation of educational trusting communities fragile and vulnerable. Both teachers and students worked consciously to weave and protect webs of trust through responsible, reflective actions.

### **Foundations for trusting relationships**

Most teachers interviewed agreed with Burbules (1993) that it was their responsibility to initiate tasks and interactions within the curriculum to entice disruptive and disengaged students to participate in class and begin the slow processes leading toward trusting relationships. Our observations suggested that teachers vested much of themselves in the act of connecting with disengaged students. Their actions went beyond simple encouragement to create an environment so interesting and motivating that students rarely refused to engage. In fact, these teachers seemed to entice or lure them into engagement using methods and tasks that disengaged students felt compelled to acknowledge. They realized many students had not had positive school experiences and only minimal academic success. These teachers used a variety of curricular content and teaching techniques to convince disruptive and disengaged students that they were worthy of trust and that they, in turn, trusted, cared for and believed in their students. They explained that disruptive students often entered their classrooms with shields of distrust and anger developed over years of school failure and perceptions of unfair treatment.

Similarly, disengaged students, marginalized by failure and irrelevant curricula, typically wore a mantle of protective disinterest equally difficult to penetrate. Students reported that they needed and respected teachers who would spend time with them and teach them the content. Several teachers explained that they worked slowly and deliberately with these students to convey their sincerity and authenticity and develop a sense of being in relation with them as they learned more about their lives and the context in which they learned (Hollingsworth *et al.* 1993).

A common theme voiced by many teachers was their effort to establish the first strands of the trusting relationships with disruptive and disengaged students, encouraging students to 'let us into their lives'. Michelle Connors described her philosophy:

I use the analogy that my students are like oysters. Life has not been good to them. Most of them have failed. Most of them are very skills-deficient. Most of them have not come from the kind of environment that I would want to come from. To protect themselves they build this shell around them. And as a teacher, what I have to do is wear away, literally by perseverance, wear away that shell to the point where I can get inside, or I have to make them open up ... because once you show a student that they can succeed, you've found that pearl that is hidden deep inside. And once that student feels comfortable enough to let you see the pearl that they have hidden inside that shell, they will work with you and for you.

We found that teachers created webs of trust by engaging students in a range of meaningful and relevant curricular activities central to opening up the 'oyster shells', and inviting students to share in a sense of community in their classrooms. In the next sections, we describe how teachers targeted students who were failing, or risked failure, in their classes. They spent time both during class and before and after school, working to entice students to trust them and the educational process, offering opportunities to engage in the curriculum and the class community. Teachers reported designing contingencies or 'second chances' that encouraged students to take risks, yet provided a safety net for them to fail and try again. They used strategies to encourage students to participate and engage, trusting them with valued responsibilities and interacting positively in an effort to build trusting relationships. These teachers tried to help students create a sense of ownership over their own behaviour and learning, and used experiential, varied and co-operative activities to encourage students to learn.

### *Second chances: offering many opportunities to engage within the class community*

Teachers estimated that between 30-60% of students in Lincoln High School had not found previous curricular experiences meaningful and relevant in their lives. They explained that these students often did not place trust in the educational process. Instead, they frequently demonstrated distrust, in part through their unwillingness to complete homework and classwork or engage positively in class discussions, thus ensuring failure in this traditional high school. Most teachers interviewed tried to develop trusting relationships with students and created alternative management strategies 'to bring them along' and help them reconnect with school work. For example, because many students did not readily complete homework, two-thirds of the teachers allotted class time to guide students to complete the written work that more highly engaged students willingly completed at home.

Jim Andrews explained that many of his hard-to-teach students needed encouragement and support to learn in his English class. They felt marginalized and alienated from school and needed him to reach out to them and provide specific kinds of assistance:

I give second chances often. I am not hard-nosed about that. I used to be. But the older I get, the more I am subjected to the needs of these students, I have learned that they have got to have many chances or they will fail and, then sadly, many ultimately drop out of school.

Many students we talked to said they listened to teachers and worked to create a situation at home where they could complete their homework. Derek, a 9th-grade student, reported that Mr. Andrews helped him to set up a schedule to complete his homework before his 'mother brought his baby sister and younger brother home from daycare'. He was able to use this opportunity to focus on his assignments and complete work at home for the first time all year. He explained that this carried over to other classes and that he was 'getting better grades now and not getting in trouble as much after school'.

Although Michelle Connors encouraged disruptive and disengaged students to trust themselves as learners and to work more independently, she was never far away when students needed assistance in locating an answer or needed a reminder to stay focused and complete the assignment:

If a kid isn't working I'll come over and sit down beside [him or her] and say, 'What's the matter? I see you haven't started; do you understand what the assignment is? Do you understand the page? Do you have a book? I don't see a pencil moving; do you have the materials that you need? You didn't bring your book? Well, you can rent one'. You know we go through that routine. I try to move a lot in the classroom, and if I see a kid sitting there and not really getting something, I'll say, 'Stuck? Do you need some help? Can I tell you what page to look on for the answer?', and so we try to give them enough that they can get started.

Observations of Michelle's classes suggested she was personally warm toward her students and respectful of them as people. She maintained that providing many chances was not a matter of lowering standards. Instead, she insisted these students needed many opportunities to learn the skills and self-discipline necessary to be successful in school and work. Although it appeared these experiences occurred as teachable moments, conversations with Michelle suggested that she planned these interactions carefully as part of her curriculum of trust-building.

Students also commented on other teachers who were willing to connect with them personally and create an environment that felt comfortable to them. Patrick, a recently enrolled 10th-grade student explained:

I mean, the way they kind of pull you aside and ask you, 'Do you got this down? Do you understand this? Did you do this at your old school? Do you want to read up on this and catch up with us?' You know, stuff like that. They let you know and make you feel comfortable because you can rely on them if, you know, you missed anything. And trust them, I guess, to where you begin to believe they actually care whether you are in school and getting a education or not.

Ladson-Billings (1994) contends that teaching for student success is an important element in building a culturally relevant pedagogy. Students think school skills will be useful and meaningful later in their lives. Providing many opportunities permitted Michelle Connors and Jim Andrews to stay connected with their students during the sometimes lengthy time-period needed to overcome student distrust. They were willing to risk the possibility that students would initially fail to complete their responsibilities. They hoped that each time students tried, they would come closer to success, learning important self-discipline and persistence strategies necessary for consistent achievement. They explained that, because these students had failed or had experienced only marginal success in schools, they had developed intense distrust of schools, the curriculum and their teachers. Students were given numerous opportunities to connect with the teacher and view the classroom as a nurturing place where they might be successful.

Several teachers pointed out, however, that although they gave numerous opportunities, students ultimately were held accountable for completing their work and progressing through the curriculum. This philosophy is consistent with Osborne's (1996) principles of culturally relevant pedagogy. Osborne provides evidence from research to support the value of student accountability as a prerequisite for achievement.

At Lincoln High School, Juanita Owens encouraged students to keep working in her business education class (keyboarding) when they fell behind, regardless of the reason:

Now I might have some kids three levels behind, and I might have some right on the lesson. I might have some a lesson ahead. But I buy books and supplementary materials and the kids cannot leave one level until they have learned that level. And that's what it is all about. You might have to come in and work on your own. But you must learn the work before you can move on.

Tamika, an 11th-grade student in Juanita's class explained why she was willing to focus on the content and work in this class:

I like being in Ms Owens's class because she hard, you know. I don't like easy people 'cause I don't learn nothing. I like her because she hard. She don't let you slide on it, you know. If you don't have it when she say have it, then you fail and you learn from that. She teach you like ... teach you what's gonna be on you in the future and, you know, help you through. But she don't let you play in there. People think she petty, but that's how you got to be sometimes.<sup>5</sup>

Most teachers told us they enticed students to learn by praising them and holding them to consistent standards for completion of their work and learning. Alice Worthington, another teacher, outlined her elaborate procedures for make-up assignments in science so students would receive some credit even when the work was completed long after the deadline. She explained that in her classes those who failed tests must return for after-school tutoring or independent practice until they convinced her they had learned the material:

But nine times out of 10 if you shower them with praise when they do something right and tell them honestly when they do something wrong, they will respect the fact that you didn't tell them that they were dumb or infer that they can't [succeed]. You just simply say, 'Well, you didn't study very much for this one did you?', and they'll be very honest, 'No, I was busy last night and I didn't study'. And I'll say, 'Well then, you are going to have to come in on Tuesday after school and put in the study time that you missed last night'. So you give them another out, and if the students feel you care about them, they will work so hard for you that your class will become a priority and eventually your work becomes less and less. And students accept more ownership and responsibility for their work. So that what you put into it in the beginning feeds back at the end.

Teachers described other strategies to entice students to engage in learning and to guide them gently through the educational process. Sara Davenport and Michelle Connors explained strategies focused on preserving and building students' self-esteem and helping them to save face in front of peers. Sara explained:

When a student exhibits some behaviour that concerns me, the first thing that I do, first and foremost is to [help the student] save face. I am considering their reaction to the way that I will respond to their behaviour, because I can really set off a lot of reactions, a chain of events that can lead to a real chaotic situation. So I try to get the kid out of the environment immediately. That's the first thing I do. We are taught in school not to ever leave students unsupervised, but sometimes I have to. I tell that student to wait for me out in the hallway ... wait for me outside. Or if I have a student who is very angry with me and that first response is anger and they say, 'I'm not getting up, or I'm not moving'. I usually go on to explain, 'I really need ...', and I put my need out there. 'I need you to go into the hallway so that you and I can talk. It's no big deal, I just want to talk and I would feel more comfortable and I think it would serve us both if you would meet me out there'. And I'm trying to remain as calm as possible. Because, like I said, my reaction to situations is often what triggers the reaction by the student. I need to diffuse it as quickly as possible and try to get them out of the environment. Oftentimes, kids will say, 'OK, OK, I'm sorry'. Or they use their slang, 'My bad'. And they sit there quietly and they'll fall in line.

Sara Davenport saw herself as a mirror in which she could reflect and intensify raw, and at times unreasoned, student anger and emotion. As a mirror, she could also help students view themselves more as others saw them, reflecting a reality that by its candour and honesty calmed students' emotions and refocused their energy on more educationally productive efforts.

Michelle Connors also responded to her students through her presence and her quiet efforts to respect their pride and consider their needs:



So I move a lot. Moving a lot is real important because a student who is not inclined to ask a question will ask it if you're there, but they won't raise their hand and draw attention to the fact that they don't know. So, if you come around and a kid is just sitting there doing nothing, there's a reason why they're sitting there, and so you ask him or her what the problem is. If the problem is that the person is not a good reader, I may read the paragraph to them at that point.

Both Sara and Michelle explained that without these remedial strategies and a nurturing environment, some students were likely to disengage further from school, fail their classes and ultimately drop out of school. Their actions showed students that they cared for them and wanted them to be successful.

Sara Davenport, in particular, was willing to reveal her vulnerabilities to her students when she 'put her needs out there'. Observations of her physical education class indicated that she worked conscientiously to create an environment in which students trusted her. They understood her intentions and the reasons behind them. Examples from our field notes suggested that she provided second chances for difficult or struggling students and patiently worked to present a positive environment:

Students are seated at desks in a classroom for the introduction to their personal fitness class. Several students are talking quietly; two have their heads down on their desks. Two are flipping pencils across the room. Ms Davenport enters the classroom and gives the pencil-shooters a hard look. They quickly retrieve their pencils, tap their chests and quietly say, 'My bad'. Ms D. returns an assignment in which students recorded and graphed their heart rates during three physical activities: rope-jumping, basketball shooting and volleyball-blocking. She explains that today they are going to calculate target heart-rates so that students can regulate the intensity of activity to avoid exhaustion and still receive health benefits from their workout. Students discuss their intensity for each task and comment on 'how hard' they thought they were working. Ms D. emphasizes the importance of personalizing the experiences—that no two people have to feel the same or need to compare themselves with others. She distributes a worksheet with instructions and formulae needed to calculate target heart-rates and then works through each using Damien's (one of the pencil-shooters) age and scores from the previous class. Damien is attentive and works through the calculations with the class. Ms D. then encourages students to insert their own scores and work through the problem independently. She walks around the room asking and answering questions. All students are engaged in the math problems, although a few are struggling and appear to need help. Ms D. assists and then asks other students to pair with the strugglers to help. When all have completed the assignment, she says, 'Now we are going into the gym and participate in three different activities. We will use the heart-rate monitors to help you stay in your target zones. I should not need to tell you to work harder or rest a bit, you will know based on the upper and lower boundaries of your target heart-rate zone that you just calculated. Set your heart-rate monitor and evaluate yourself accordingly. OK, please walk to the gym'.

In this class, typically disruptive and disengaged students were given second chances to behave appropriately and focus on academic work. Students, whom we had previously observed having difficulty engaging in mathematics class, connected with the formulae and procedures in physical education, perhaps because the content was relevant and meaningful to them. Sara Davenport patiently explained the process to be used, why it was important, and why students should learn this information for themselves. This pedagogy appeared to be an important step in enhancing students' respect and trust for the teacher and the content.

According to Noddings (1992), the development of teacher-student caring relationships is essential to the creation of trust and interpersonal commitment. Modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation are building blocks of a caring relationship. Teachers at Lincoln High School, such as Michelle, Jim, Juanita and Sara, engaged in these caring behaviours and, in so doing, modelled trust for their students. They showed interest in their students, talked to them honestly about the outcomes or consequences of behaviours and permitted them to offer alternative and non-traditional responses, jointly constructing a shared curriculum. They confirmed their

trust and care for students by permitting them to follow alternative curricular avenues while guiding them to expend effort and devote time to learning.

These teachers also attempted to connect with their students and encouraged them to 'open up' to their offers of assistance and interest. They asked students to talk to them about important aspects of their lives and to provide personal or socially relevant interpretations of traditional disciplinary knowledge. This strategy appeared to assist teachers in developing the knowledge of their students' lives that led to caring and relational knowing. Jim Andrews, for instance, reported that students were more willing to engage and connect when he made the effort to learn and understand literature through a more contemporary view of the world as reflected in students' neighbourhoods. He encouraged students to present both traditional and 'student-generated' interpretations of literature assignments. Students we had observed as 'disengaged' in other classes became connected and responsive, eagerly presenting both perspectives, acting in short class plays and responding to both the meaningfulness of the content and the process of learning.

These teachers used many opportunities and their growing relational knowledge of students' lives to demonstrate their belief in the efficacy of students' ability and motivation to learn (Hollingsworth *et al.* 1993, Ladson-Billings 1994). Numerous opportunities to engage and find success provided students with personalized ways to validate themselves through tangible and concrete examples of completed assignments. Thus, formerly disruptive and disengaged students could receive legitimate rewards and praise typical of other students. The teachers attempted to restore a sense of 'effort optimism' (Ogbu 1994), conveying to students that, 'at least in my classroom, your efforts will be rewarded'. They encouraged students to use effective strategies associated with information-seeking to continue searching for an answer even when it was not readily evident. They rewarded both the process and the product of their efforts in the hope of developing meaningful connections between themselves, their subject and their students. Because students were permitted to contribute content from their lives, they became legitimate partners in the construction of their school curriculum.

Ladson-Billings (1994) maintained that these practices are central to developing trusting relationships with all students, especially those of colour. Giving second chances required teachers to be flexible and to visualize various avenues for students to demonstrate learning. Teachers, such as Michelle and Sara, showed that they wanted to work with students and believed students could be successful. They helped students to connect the content and work habits to their lives and to find a place for schoolwork within their busy out-of-school lives. Second chances provided students with many opportunities to develop the skills necessary to be successful and create connected, trusting relationships with teachers (Delpit 1988). Students, such as Patrick, Damien and Tamika, who may have been exposed to these ideas earlier in their school careers but had never integrated them into their working or learning strategies, had yet another chance to find an optimal combination of strategies to encourage their learning.

### *Developing trust through positive interactions*

Disruptive and disengaged students often do not have opportunities for positive adult interactions in urban high schools. After years of negative interactions with teachers and administrators at Lincoln High School, some students appeared unable to ameliorate or reverse their behaviours to take advantage of the educational and social reward systems in high schools (Finn *et al.* 1995). When students are consistently unsuccessful, they can become angry, bitter and further alienated from school, teachers and the learning process. Several teachers we talked to at Lincoln High School explained that they worked for months with some students to encourage them first to relate to them personally and then to connect with learning. They sought opportunities to converse with students about relevant topics and rewarded positive learning-oriented behaviours as a foundation for engagement.

Joy Barnes, a physical education teacher, described one strategy she used to convince students that she trusted them and valued their contributions to her class:

Students who are disruptive and consistently failing other classes often perform quite well in my physical education classes. Basically in my class if an individual is skillful and familiar already with an activity or sport that we are doing, I ask them to demonstrate and lead the class from their point of view. It's such a simple strategy, but it means so much to them. The attention is not always drawn to them only when they are misbehaving. Some kids tell me this is the only praise they receive in school.

Sara Davenport explained that she continued to try a variety of techniques to reward students, demonstrate her trust, and emphasize student strengths:

... and you know that old stuff we learned about assigning students special duties and responsibilities? It works!—especially with tough-to-teach students. I really seek out the strengths of my students. These kids can't get enough positive feedback. I avoid praising kids in front of peers because of peer pressure. But I give them lots of one-on-one praise and attention. And they like to hear that, and know it, and walk away with it. It shocks them because they don't hear it at home. They never hear it.

Modelling caring, trusting behaviours was also an essential component of the positive interactions that Julie Evans developed in her mathematics classroom and throughout the school:

You also have to give recognition and attention outside of class; it cannot be just in class. When I am in that hallway, I better know my kids, talk with them and respond to them. I don't care how bad my day is; I've got to show them there is consistency in my behaviour. If I want it in theirs, they have got to see that in mine.

Most of the students we talked to appeared to relish positive interactions and recognition. Our observations suggested that if attention associated with positive academic success was not forthcoming or appeared impossible to attain, students would seek attention in other ways. Negative attention or recognition related to disruptive behaviour was the easiest to acquire—simply violate a rule or irritate a teacher. John Roberts reported that students in his social studies class quickly learned behaviours that made him angry and frustrated. The old adage, 'Love me, hate me, but don't ignore me!' seemed to reflect students' intense need for attention. Some students indicated they would rather be reprimanded or suspended for disruptive behaviours than be ignored. John said that he worked deliberately to satisfy students' needs for attention by showing them that he recognized them as individuals, trusted them to make responsible decisions, and cared for them as valued class members. He believed students who felt cared for were more willing to trust and value his knowledge while working to connect their schoolwork to their lives and to prior knowledge. Furthermore, he thought that interactions with teachers fostered positive attention from other students, contributing to self-esteem and creating a positive learning community. Sean, one of the students in John's social studies class explained what teacher attention meant to him:

I like a teacher who is interested in what they're teaching and interested in teaching it to me! I understand that there is a set curriculum for teachers, but some of them, they venture from that or they add on to it. I know they are trying to make it interesting for me. They are giving time and attention to me by going out of their way to make it something I want to learn. It helps me learn. I like them to teach how they think they want to be taught. If they want to sit there and listen to somebody drone on about something, then I guess that's how they are going to teach. But if they want to be turned on and interested and sparked and inspired, then that's how they should teach. And when they do that, they are teaching for me.

Several teachers explained that they were most successful in creating trust bonds when they treated students with respect and integrity, joked and teased, and made them feel important. Similar to findings reported by Farrell *et al.* (1988), even the most disruptive students were more likely to pause to consider the requests from teachers with whom they had established a positive and respectful rapport. Using strategies to motivate students to control themselves rather than act confrontationally is consistent with current conceptualizations of culturally

relevant pedagogy (Osborne 1996). Teachers used indirect, private forms of persuasion, indicating to students that they were interested in their well-being and willing to make the effort to point out the problem and an alternative course of action (Ballenger 1992).

Teachers and students jointly constructed a vision for the curriculum that included the goals and aspirations of both parties (Ennis 1998). Weiner (1993) suggested that the vision is shaped from and within the context in which students live and learn. Students are more likely to expend effort when they think the teacher is interested in them and makes the content meaningful in their lives. Relational interactions are essential when working with marginalized students because they create the opportunity for shared meaning (Schlosser 1992, Sheets 1996). Creating curriculum as a joint vision for learning involves a process of knowledge-construction, teacher support and attention, and content-connections linked to the contexts that hold special value for students.

This curricular vision is particularly elusive, however, with disruptive and disengaged students who have been marginalized and alienated by the schooling process. Several teachers at Lincoln High School first attracted these students' interest by giving them positive attention for small social and academic successes. They worked slowly to model and reward appropriate learning behaviours that students had either been unaware of or refused to acknowledge. As the personal relationship between the teacher and students matured, teachers trusted students to fulfill responsibilities and continued to build tasks carefully to enhance student opportunities to achieve challenging success. Students began to acknowledge the quality of their work and accept the fact that 'hard work' was required to achieve academic success. This mentor—apprentice relationship, described by Vygotsky (1978) as a critical component of social constructivism, is based on trust between the teacher and the student. It fosters the joint construction of a curricular vision of academic and social success that both teachers and students acknowledged as attainable and instrumental in reconnecting students with the educational process. Furthermore, the gradually developing feelings of mutual trust prepared students for more difficult academic tasks associated with independent learning, community building and ownership of their learning environment.

### *Entrusting students with ownership*

Several teachers told us that difficult students worked particularly well when they were trusted to create meaningful classroom policies or encouraged to infuse their unique personalities or beliefs into the final product. Students we observed worked particularly well in groups or co-operative learning settings and enjoyed creating and owning the projects resulting from these interactions.

All students, and especially disruptive and disengaged students, needed to feel in control and responsible for curricular tasks within the classroom. Teacher-assigned duties often lead to a greater sense of responsibility for self, trust for others, and a willingness to control their own behaviours. Stinson (1993) explains that when students are offered choices in matters that they consider important, they think they have an active and direct role in their future. Decisions about where to sit, when to talk, whom to work with, and what and how to learn are very important to adolescents. Students we talked to said they became angry and frustrated when they were not permitted choices in these essential curricular and social activities. Unfortunately, when teachers believe they must control these decisions, students react and resist, damaging bonds of trust, and requiring additional control measures (Noguera 1995).

Controlling mechanisms, such as withdrawal of privileges, dismissal from the classroom, and detention and suspensions, convey distrust and domination rather than confirmation and trust. Demonstrating and maintaining power and control becomes more important than the negative public and private consequences of those actions. Noguera (1995) insists that increased efforts to control students trigger *more* disruptive and violent student behaviour, leading to the need for additional, highly visible and expensive controls, such as security cameras, chained gates and guards. All were present at Lincoln High School.

Conversely, educational communities built on trust appear to depend more on open-ended dialogue and a careful consideration of others' needs (Noddings 1992). Building communities of trust at Lincoln High School began in individual teachers' classrooms with small acts of openness and student confirmation. Ownership was

the result of teacher trust, resulting in appropriate student behaviours and enhanced student willingness to continue to engage in the curriculum and behave appropriately. Trust was reciprocal. Students learned to trust teachers to respond consistently and fairly and to guide the learning process. They began to listen and understand the rationale behind content decisions, policies and rules and to demonstrate greater thoughtfulness in the classroom. David, a 9th-grade student explained:

It's like first I'm not going to do no work for the whole school year. I'm just sitting in class going to sleep every day. OK, Mr James he just changed it around. He took time to talk to me about my schoolwork. He put it on me to read and do my work. He showed me that if I did it the way he wanted it, I could pass the quarter. I got a B in his class. I work hard in his class because he asks you to do your work. That's how I started doing work in all my classes.

Angela Jackson, a science teacher, used co-operative learning strategies to provide effective avenues to vary the class environment and to provide ownership of the content and process. She explained that co-operative learning strategies encouraged students to focus and refocus on different individuals within the group and combined a series of relatively short tasks to create a meaningful solution. Angela described the use of co-operative learning strategies to build trusting relationships and assist students to engage in her classes:

Positive experiences pump them up and reward them for their effort. It gives them a reason to try next time. I try to capitalize on these feelings with praise and a positive grade. I want them to begin to trust me to teach something meaningful and to recognize when they are successful and reward them for it. They particularly like learning by doing. I get some who might go into the lab area and want to play around and not do [the assignment] and visit at someone else's lab table. But others are there, if they are visited, they are there to help them find out how to do something. They know I trust them to teach each other. I think they learn it there if they don't learn it from me. Sometimes, they would prefer to ask their classmates the third time than to come back and ask me. I don't know why that is but they do and then they understand and are more likely to complete the work.

Disruptive and disengaged students assumed a valid and valued group role within co-operative learning settings (Wehlage *et al.* 1989). This was a role in which others trusted them to be responsible and to contribute to the group's success through their intelligence and their ability to read, write, calculate and learn. For many urban students this was a new and very rewarding experience. Class experiences, such as second chances, positive interactions and student ownership, created a foundation for trusting relationships and slowly convinced disruptive and disengaged students they could work positively with others and be successful. It appeared to be an important step in developing a classroom community worthy of their trust.

### **Creating classroom communities worthy of trust**

The functional curriculum of educational trust emerged as a result of teachers' concerted actions to reach these hard-to-teach students. They used strategies of second chances, positive interactions and student ownership to create a stable foundation of trust predicated on the development of four essential elements: shared expectations, persistence, commitment, and voice. These elements were planned purposefully and implemented flexibly. Although each curricular element contributed a strand instrumental to the development of trust, together they represented the interwoven, mutually supporting web bonding together these individuals within a trusting community.

#### ***Shared expectations***

Teacher-initiated expectations for academic success were the first solid indicators of support that many students acknowledged as they attempted to engage with the educational process. Reasonable, reachable expectations awakened students to the possibility they could be accepted as valued participants in the classroom. They reported that these teachers were often the only individuals who voiced expectations for their academic success. As expectations were accepted and guided into successful performances, students began to believe in their ability and worked more consistently and conscientiously to develop trusting relationships. Because many

students brought histories of distrust to the educational process, teachers acknowledged and accepted their roles as initiators and facilitators of the trusting process. They described their mission as one of 'opening' the student to trusting relationships and sustaining and deepening those relationships through perseverance and high-quality, meaningful instruction. This aspect of the process appeared most tenuous and at risk for failure. Like a spider locating a stable branch to support the first web filaments, teachers explored a variety of potential trust-building strategies as foundations for each student's individual web of trust.

Teachers consciously worked to create environments in which students felt comfortable and could focus on learning. They purposefully created settings in which they could interact positively with students and begin to understand the aspects of students' lives that both created their sense of self and placed them most at risk for academic failure in this urban high school. Teachers then trusted their students to respond positively by 'letting them in' to their lives and working harder to participate and engage in class (Burbules 1993, Baier 1994). This process often required extended time-periods and patience to develop positive interactions that nurtured students' self-esteem and efficacy as learners.

Teachers used carefully constructed interactive environments to build and enhance trusting relationships with their previously disconnected students (MacGrath 1998). These relationships appeared to be consistent with the elements of culturally relevant pedagogy described by Ladson-Billings (1994) and Osborne (1996). According to Ladson-Billings, a culturally relevant curriculum focuses on the jointly constructed beliefs and values of the teacher and students. It develops through dynamic social relations nurtured in the classroom and fostered through conceptualizations of curricular knowledge that are jointly acknowledged and valued.

### *Persistence*

Part of this process of developing shared expectations focused on building students' expectations of trust. Trust cannot be sustained when only one of the parties is trusting. To maintain the trusting relationship and use it as a foundation for educational progress, both teachers and students must be willing to persist while acknowledging the possibility of rejection by the other, often resulting in academic and sometimes personal failure. At Lincoln High School these teachers worked to convince students that they were, in fact, worthy of their trust. Although time-consuming, teachers' strategies often were successful in breaking through students' barriers, as Michelle Connors described it, 'to find the pearls' protected deep inside.

Although they acknowledged that other teachers had given up on these students and exasperated administrators were ready to suspend and expel them, many teachers believed they could find avenues to help most students engage in the curriculum and in the learning process. They were willing to persist with students, giving them several opportunities to turn in homework, revise papers and complete tests. Juanita Owens, for example, emphasized that she did not lower her standards or expectations for marginalized or disenfranchized students. Instead, she tried to understand that past academic failures made motivation more difficult and academic feelings of efficacy more tenuous. She worked to recognize students who attempted to complete the work, contributed to class and accepted personal responsibility for learning. Juanita made the effort to convince her students that giving effort was worth the risk. She confirmed through her class policies and her personal interactions that she trusted and believed in students' academic ability and would support their efforts to learn.

There were consistent underlying tensions throughout the school associated with student disruption. These tensions were evident in discussions in the faculty room where vocal teachers complained bitterly about class disruptions and about administrators' inability to solve the problem. Interviews with the principal and assistant principals indicated that they believed their first priority was to provide a safe school, thus the security cameras, gates and guards. They believed they had met their responsibility when dangerous students were removed from the school or were being monitored closely. That mission 'accomplished', they indicated that it was the teachers' responsibility to use strategies effective in engaging students in their classes. Interestingly, they often agreed with the students who indicated that many teachers continued to lecture and appeared not to revise their lessons from year-to-year. Thus, the tensions above and below the surface at Lincoln High School limited school-wide changes.

Individual teachers, however, avoided confrontations with colleagues, insisting that their 'best' work was done in the privacy and relative freedom of their classrooms. Clearly, they believed they were making progress and noted small but significant gains with particular students. Although they acknowledged that a school- and district-wide effort was needed to reform the instructional environment, most had accepted the fact that they were unable to initiate these changes. Nevertheless, teachers to whom we talked were determined to persist in their efforts. They willingly tried strategies until they found ones that worked. Often these strategies were discovered one student at a time, leading gradually to the creation of a web of mutual trust.

### *Commitment*

Teachers expanded and deepened the evolving webs of trust by nurturing teacher—student relationships consistent with those described by Ladson-Billings (1994: 55) as 'fluid, humanly equitable, [and extending] to interactions beyond the classroom and into the community'. Teachers demonstrated their commitment to try different ways of structuring the class, placing students' knowledge at the centre of the curriculum. They trusted students to make positive educational decisions about class management and content, to assume leadership roles in daily classroom tasks, and to work co-operatively in peer-teaching situations. They worked to convince students that they cared for them and were committed to their welfare (Webb and Blond 1995). These in-depth relationships created a sense of professional commitment embedded within their curriculum. It was a curriculum '*in-relation*' with students and deeply connected to their lived experiences (Hollingsworth *et al.* 1993). By acknowledging that each individual already possessed valuable knowledge, teachers affirmed their belief that all students could participate as legitimate members of the learning community and use their knowledge as a foundation for more in-depth learning.

Commitment motivates both teachers and students to search for alternatives, expend effort and reward progress (Delpit 1988, Ladson-Billings 1994). For example, Sara Davenport and Michelle Connors structured classes so they could work individually and privately with students, developing trusting relationships as they explained both the content and the processes used to understand and make the curriculum content relevant. They encouraged student learning by providing many opportunities for student success. In this safe, comfortable environment, teachers invited students to make learning a priority and find the time to complete their work. They worked slowly and persistently to weave the web of trust essential in learning communities.

### *Voice*

Creating educational environments worthy of student trust in urban high schools is a difficult and demanding process. Despite frequent student failures, teachers at Lincoln High School persisted in trusting their students, many of whom had never experienced positive, supportive relationships with teachers or other adults. Developing trusting communities as an essential curricular component in these classes was based on creating an environment students perceived as fair and just, and one in which they were willing to voice their opinions. Teachers provided numerous opportunities to complete assignments and the flexibility students needed to learn successful academic and life-skill strategies. Students used these tasks to evaluate their progress in relation to stable performance criteria.

Student voice was nurtured through positive, supportive curricular structures that disrupted students' expectations for the oppressive practices experienced in previous educational settings. Students perceived the environment as emotionally and physically safe. It was an environment that built on their strengths and forged new understandings which permitted many opportunities to speak, learn and succeed. Students believed teachers who 'took the time', 'spent time with me' and 'got on me' about academic effort and performance were worth speaking to. Curricular engagement opened opportunities for dialogue and connectedness on a personal level, creating many valued experiences with adults.

When students were trusted to have a 'voice' and to use their voice to further curricular goals valued by all, the authoritative power that traditionally resided in the role of the teacher was distributed and shared, encouraging students to reap the benefits of academic and contextual ownership. Issues of voice appeared central to students' conceptualizations of a fair and just learning environment. In Jim Andrews's classes, students were invited to

share in the joint construction of curricular knowledge and were allowed a voice in the interpretation of its meaning. They were permitted to share authority with the teacher, identify content worth learning and influence how they learned and used knowledge in the classroom.

The opportunities provided by these teachers for disruptive and disengaged students to connect with the content and to bond personally with teachers is in stark contrast to practices in many US urban high schools. In these environments, including the one at Lincoln High School, the pervasive climate of control overwhelmed and thwarted these few teachers' efforts to empower students as active decision makers and partners in learning. The often prevalent view that these students needed to be corralled and constrained triggered more disruptive behaviours that, in turn, required more extreme controls (Noguera 1995).

Webs of trust are based on fragile foundations of respect and care. Webs are built with carefully placed strands of expectations, persistence, commitment and voice. Efforts to control, coerce and command shatter these tenuous foundations, destroying the strands of trust as they tear apart a few teachers' efforts to build relationships with distrustful children. Although controlling and confining measures often make adults feel more secure, it is only a temporary illusion of safety and one that may thwart efforts to connect and build relationships with students who are most in need of this care.

The framework of educational trust that emerged from this research was posited on teachers and students working co-operatively to build shared expectations and jointly constructed curricula (Ennis 1998). Teachers worked persistently, first to demonstrate their own commitment, and then to create a shared sense of commitment with students for their success. They assisted students to find their voices as they became more comfortable in school. The extent of students' engagement in these settings was in stark contrast to their previous schools in which frustration and failure contributed to feelings of disruption and disengagement. The development of trusting relationships required teachers to persist in their efforts to disrupt this pattern, marshal curricular and pedagogical skills and expend energy to open their students' oyster shells, revealing the pearls of commitment and voice. Together, these efforts were important first steps in creating teacher—student relationships, shared curricular and classroom communities worthy of student trust.

## Notes

1. For additional discussion of the concept of 'antitrust', see Baier (1986).
2. Pseudonyms are used for the names of the school, students and teachers.
3. The percentage of students who receive government assistance in the form of free or reduced-cost breakfast and lunch is an indicator that is widely used in the USA of the proportion of students in the school from low-income families.
4. Students in the first phase of the study were asked to describe positive and negative class experiences and make suggestions for changing school, class policies or content to be more interesting or meaningful. Each interview included both generic questions regarding teacher and student behaviours at Lincoln High School and specific questions about their own behaviours and how they responded to the tasks and student and teacher behaviours that occurred in the classes observed. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed at the conclusion of the school day.
5. We have maintained and reproduced the students' exact words (to the best of our ability) in an effort to reflect the power of US Black speech in conveying these students' lived experiences.

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