

What is Social Capital and how might it be used in Scotland's Schools?

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The term 'social capital' describes the various resources that people may have through their relationships in families, communities and other social networks. Social capital bonds people together and helps them make links beyond their immediate friends and neighbours, for example, into learning or employment opportunities. This *Briefing* draws on the first stages of research aimed at enabling schools and teachers to develop and use social capital to support improved pupil achievement. This research is part of a five year programme, the Applied Education Research Scheme (AERS), funded jointly by the Scottish Executive Education Department and Scottish Higher Education Funding Council.

- ▶ Social capital is hard to define but it might be described as the 'social glue' that holds people together in families and communities and gives them a sense of belonging in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world. It is developed in our relationships, through doing things for one another and in the trust that we develop in one another;
- ▶ Social capital may help in bonding people together and promoting a sense of shared identity, in bridging communities to the wider world through networks that extend their communications with others, and in linking people to opportunities and structures of support;
- ▶ Policy makers are interested in social capital as a resource that may help combat social exclusion. However, social capital may also be misused to distract attention from inequalities in wealth and resources in society and problems of poverty;
- ▶ If social capital enables people and communities to develop capacities, then it could be recognised and promoted in schools;
- ▶ Measuring social capital is a complex and difficult task. Its use in educational policy and practice requires the development of reliable indicators that avoid the pitfalls of associating social capital with middle class values and which take account of key social and cultural features of Scottish society.

Introduction

This *Briefing* reports on research that forms part of the 5-year programme of work of the Applied Education Research Scheme Schools and Social Capital Network (AERS SSC). The overarching purpose of research in the Schools and Social Capital Network is to use social capital ideas to help schools to work better with pupils who are most at risk of social exclusion. This work is needed because of the increased risks that some pupils (and some communities) will find themselves left behind or left out in the increasingly competitive struggle for good results, secure and rewarding employment, and a 'good life'. There is concern that there may be a widening gap between those who succeed and those who are marked by failure. Schools – and the wider society – may be becoming more polarised, with improvements available for those who can take advantage of opportunities offered to them, but with a greater risk of social exclusion for those who cannot. In this context anxiety about social exclusion has prompted policy interest in social capital and its development in education.

What is social capital?

While social capital is hard to define, it might be conceptualised as the 'social glue' that holds people together and gives them a sense of belonging in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world. It is developed in our relationships, through doing things for one another and in the trust that we develop in one another. It helps in **bonding** fragmented social life; in the **bridging** of communities to places and contacts beyond their immediate environment and in the **linking** of people to formal structures and agencies that they may need for help with opportunities for education or employment. It is important to distinguish between these different forms of social capital, and to appreciate that social capital may open or limit opportunities.

- **BONDING** social capital is characterised by strong bonds among group members: this variety of social capital can help people to 'get by'. It is valuable in building a sense of shared identity and security. Families may create strong bonds, and these may be very supportive but they may also put pressure on a young person to conform to family expectations. Bonding social capital may be developed and recognised in different ways in a school setting, some forms may work with the school aims and organisation while others may seem to work against it (for example the bonding social capital that is produced in disruptive behaviour among groups of pupils);
- **BRIDGING** social capital is a resource that helps people to build relationships with a wider, more varied set of people than those in the immediate family or school environment, for example

between students and employers, or teachers and community workers. Bridging social capital helps people to 'get on' and not just 'get by'. Bridging social capital is understood as important in helping employment and career advancement;

- **LINKING** social capital enables connections between people across differences in status, for example, links between parents of children attending the same school, but from different backgrounds, or between their children. It may help teachers link with parents or children from different social, religious or ethnic backgrounds from their own. Linking social capital connects individuals and agencies or services that they would not otherwise access easily. Linking social capital may help people 'get around'.

These ideas about social capital owe a lot to the work of the American theorist and social commentator Robert Putnam, author of the influential book 'Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community' (Putnam 2000). Putnam is concerned about what he sees as the breakdown of social relations in the USA and looks for ways of restoring the 'features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives'. He argues that the development of trust for one another and doing things for one another in networks promotes solidarity and build positive attitudes to the institutions and relationships that make up civic community. Schools are important institutions in which civic community and positive attitudes may be developed. However theories and applications of social capital that have developed from Putnam's ideas are not without their critics.

Is social capital a useful concept?

Critics argue that social exclusion stems from poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth and resources in society. This critical strand is reflected in the work of Pierre Bourdieu who believes that economic capital underpins social capital and interacts with wider structures to reproduce social inequalities. Social capital, he says, enables individuals and groups to access valued resources (Bourdieu 1993:68). These resources are connected to class advantage, and different forms of social interaction connect to and reinforce class inequalities, for example being a football fan rather than a member of the Rotary Club. Thus social capital ideas may conceal the effects of 'real' capital and power, and may reinforce a culture of 'blame' of those who fail to observe middle class norms. The issues raised by these points are informing our thinking and research throughout the project, and raise the following questions for us:

- Is social capital promoting a particular moral agenda that suggests that middle class values are

intrinsically good and that deviation from them is undesirable/blameworthy? In other words, is social capital used to blame the victim?

- Can we agree on norms that are acceptable to all involved (parents, pupils, community members, teachers and policy-makers), for example, engagement with learning, or active citizenship, or well-being, or access to employment?
- Can social capital help explain or change outcomes at individual, school or system level? How can this be done?
- Could measures of social capital be used to guide the allocation of resources for education, putting more resource in places where the development of social capital needs support?
- In other words, how might we use social capital to shape or extend how we think about schooling, the community and the education system?

Measuring social capital

In order to use social capital it is necessary first to find some way of ‘capturing’ it. If we can arrive at ways of measuring the absence or presence of different kinds of social capital, then we can use them to generate indicators of social capital that can be used by schools who want to recognise it, work with it and generate positive forms of it among particular pupils, or schools, or communities.

Social capital, however, is difficult to measure. In particular, it has proved very difficult indeed to measure participation and social engagement among those groups which are disengaged from formal ‘civic engagement’. Most indicators of social capital are not appropriate because they derive from information about voting, or membership of voluntary schemes or associations that reflect rather middle class preoccupations. As a result they may not pick up informal forms of social participation, and so reinforce the assumption that working class communities and individuals are lacking in civic engagement. Research, including government research (see www.statistics.gov.uk/socialcapital) may produce evidence of deficit, because the research instruments implicitly assume middle class values and may also fail to take account of gender, ethnicity and disability. There is also a neglect of the context or culture in which social capital is being measured: yet research indicates that cultural and community norms have a strong impact on provision of, and participation in, education (Field and Spence 2000).

In addition national measures of social capital are not designed for use with young people nor do they explore the role of the school as a site of social capital development. As the AERS Social Capital project is concerned with schools and social capital in Scotland it needs to focus on indicators that take account of key structural and cultural features of Scottish society and

Scottish education. Data need to be considered in relation to:

- Rural and urban differences within Scotland (most existing social capital themes and indicators have an implicit or explicit urban context)
 - Patterns of employment/changing labour markets (with particular attention to the decline of traditional industry and the growth of leisure and service work and the gendered nature of that work)
 - The relationship between social class and educational attainment over time in Scotland
 - Rising levels of attainment and participation in education over time in Scotland
 - Culture, climate and ethos in schools in Scotland.
- It will be obvious that the task of measuring social capital is complex.

Collaborative research

The AERS project is intended to build collaboration between researchers, policy makers and practitioners in addressing complex problems facing schools, as well as building research capacity to help address these issues. The Social Capital Network has been able to draw on the advice and experience of its associate members, who include policy makers and practitioners as well as researchers. Workshops to develop ideas and strategies have included researchers, representatives of schools, of LAs and of local community groups. Discussions in these wider fora emphasised the following points:

- the need to combine quantitative measurement of social capital with qualitative evidence;
- the importance of the ways in which social capital is acquired and developed; and
- the need for recognition of possible tensions between different ‘social capitals’ possessed by schools, teachers, parents, and pupils.

Social capital in schools

Informed by these discussions, we have arrived at a number of possible measures of social capital. These have been developed in relation to (a) the family (b) the neighbourhood (c) the community organisation and (d) the school. Figure 1 gives an example of indicators that might be useful in measuring social capital in schools.

These indicators will be derived from pupils, parents, teachers, school staff, and other professionals. The aim is to give a nuanced picture of social capital that avoids the problems of middle-class bias discussed above. This also enables us to identify where different groups with a stake in building social capital in the school have different views or perspectives on social capital, and so allows us to recognise conflict or tension between different social capitals.

Figure 1: School social capital indicators

- Community and family contacts with school
- Attitudes to school among communities and within families
- School-related social activities-among staff, and with community
- Friendship networks among staff, among students, and with communities
- Participation in school governance by staff, students, parents and communities
- Relationships with and among teachers and other school staff members
- Teachers' relationships with other professionals
- Communication and information within schools and with communities
- Responsiveness to particular issues, including diversity

The intention is that these indicators may be used in a number of ways, for example, to support school development planning through:

- identifying where additional resources to support productive social capital should be targeted;
- identifying networks that are successful in developing social capital, and extending their reach; and
- assessing and supporting School Development Planning as a way of enhancing productive social capital.

Conclusions

This *Briefing* reports on the first phase of work on the AERS Social Capital project. This work has helped to orientate the project by exploring existing indicators of social capital and considering them in a Scottish context, while generating wider discussion about the purposes and pitfalls of attempting to develop social capital indicators. The scale of the task is substantial, and there is still a great deal of work to be done. Details of the overarching AERS Social Capital project, and the schedule of work and opportunities for

participation are on the AERS website: (www.aers.org.uk/aers/ssc.network.html).

References

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About this study

The Schools and Social Capital Network is coordinated by a management team chaired by Professor Julie Allan from the University of Stirling. Ralph Catts is the Senior Research Fellow attached to the Social Capital Network. The management group is assisted by an Advisory Committee made up of representatives of the education professions, community organisations and local and national policy makers. The three inter-related projects of the Network are: Project 1: Education and Inequalities: defining and measuring social capital Project 2: Redesigning Professionalism and enabling professionals to use, recognise and develop social capital, and Project 3: Recognising Identities: Building social capital among Learners. See the website for further details (www.aers.org.uk/aers/ssc.network.html)

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