

Full Length Research Paper

Effects of social capital on academic success: A narrative synthesis

Erkan Acar

Department of Human Development, Marywood University, PA, USA.
E-mail: erkanacr@gmail.com, eacar@m.marywood.edu. Tel: 0015708013707.

Accepted 17 May, 2011

Many researchers link social capital theory to education and commonly use examples from the field of education to examine social capital theory. Accordingly, they accept that reflections and contributions of social capital can be observed in the field of education. This paper examines social capital's effects on academic success in education. In view of that, the paper discusses the definition of social capital. Accordingly, it explains the social capital theory, its development and its linkages to education. Further, parallel to many researchers, this paper focuses on two types of social capital: (1) family social capital and (2) society social capital. With respect to ethical considerations, this paper also examines ethics of care in utilizing social capital.

Key words: Social capital, academic success, parental involvement to education, community involvement to education.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of literature and research on social capital and its relationship to education. Increasingly, political and educational leaders propose social capital as a solution to persistent social problems (Dika and Singh, 2002). Yet there seems to be no unanimous definition of social capital. Social capital has been given a number of definitions, many of which refer to its manifestations rather than to social capital itself (Fukuyama, 1999). In other words, social capital is typically defined by its functions. These functions vary from definition to definition, but there are two elements that most definitions have in common. They are: (a) some aspects of social structures, and (b) actors whose actions are facilitated within those social structures (Coleman, 1988). Cohen and Prusak (2001) refer to social capital as a dynamic and even organic phenomenon. Their approach also emphasizes social capital's role and function, rather than social capital itself. They underline: (1) how social capital works in organizations; (2) how investments are made in social capital, and (3) the return that these organizations and individuals experience from these investments (p. 3). In this framework, they offer the working definition of social capital as "the stock of active connections among people; the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and communities and make

cooperative action possible" (p. 4). In the same vein, the World Bank Social Capital Initiative (1998) defines social capital as: "internal, social and cultural coherence of society, the norms and values that govern interactions among people and the institutions in which they are embedded" (p. 3).

Social capital is therefore seen as the glue that holds societies together, without which society at large would collapse. This paper examined social capital's effects on academic success in education. Understanding how social capital contributes to students' academic success can be beneficial for educators, parents and community leaders as they develop new strategies and plans for better educational success.

SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY

The notion of social capital was first extensively elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu in his theoretical work (Bourdieu, 1986), where social capital is one in a cluster of concepts that also includes human and cultural capital. Recently, however, his approach has been largely abandoned as newer developments of economic and sociological thought are pursued. In 1988 James Coleman, who is widely accepted as the initial theoretical

developer of the social capital theory, published one of the most cited and influential articles on the concept. In his article "social capital in the creation of human capital" (1988), Coleman illustrated how customary and apparently nonrational social behaviors could be understood as attempts to overcome economic externalities and market failures. His illustrations about social capital theory are also applied to a range of social contexts and issues. Accordingly, scientists from different fields, and especially at the World Bank, have begun to apply the notion of social capital to their analyses of everything from housing markets to crime, health and growth rates. As Green and Preston (2001) stated, social capital has thus come to be seen as a flexible conceptual tool that can be used to explain a wide array of social problems including education.

To illustrate how social capital functions in a society, Coleman employs his famous example of the mother of six children who moves with her husband and her children from suburban Detroit to Jerusalem. The mother identifies as the reason for their immigration, the increased freedom that Jerusalem will provide to her children. She will feel safe letting her eight year old take a younger sibling to school across town on the city bus. She also feels that her children will be safe playing without supervision in a city park in Jerusalem. Coleman states that the difference lies in the social capital available in Jerusalem compared to suburban Detroit.

Since the normative structure ensures that unattended children will be "looked after" by adults in Jerusalem, this mother will be more comfortable there. In contrast, normative structures in most metropolitan cities of the United States will not provide such social capital for her family (Coleman, 1988). Although this example concerns a single group of individuals, Coleman asserts that social capital can also be seen to have a positive effect at the community level (Coleman, 1988). Other examples of social capital, then, would be: (1) e-mail exchanges among members of an HIV support group, (2) a person informally carrying someone else's money in an unsealed envelope to the bank for deposit, or (3) a person informing neighbors about notices that come from the municipal building. Overall social capital is applied to and found in and among neighbors, schools, civic associations, friendship networks and so on. One of the most important developers of the social capital theory is a political scientist called Robert Putnam. According to Putnam (2000) social capital greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly. When social capital exists in a society in the form of norms, sanctions, or trust and trustworthiness, everyday business and social interactions become less costly. In addition, social capital improves people's knowledge and perspectives by raising and widening their awareness. The strong bonds and links that people have with other individuals and organizations maintain certain character traits such as toleration, empathy, reciprocal respect and eagerness to

engage in dialog with other members in a society. In contrast, people with less connection or interconnectedness with others find themselves less able to test the accuracy of their own views and opinions. Without such an opportunity, people grow less tolerant, more cynical, and more likely to be swayed by negative or unhealthy impulses. Furthermore, associational and relational networks that comprise social capital serve as channels for the flow of helpful information amongst people, and this facilitates the pursuit of individual and collective interests.

Accordingly, Putnam sees social capital as an essential component for a healthy, safer and developed society. Many researchers (Bankston, 2004; Field, 2003; Horvat et al., 2003) link social capital theory to education and commonly use examples from the field of education to examine social capital theory. Accordingly, they accept that reflections and contributions of social capital can be observed in the field of education. Since educational success is highly associated with participation by others, such can be found in parental and community involvement, social capital may play a critical role in improving overall successes in education.

SOCIAL CAPITAL IN FAMILY AND IN COMMUNITY

Coleman (1988) investigates social capital from two different perspectives and thus separates family and environment as the two major providers of social capital. He states that social capital in both family and community plays a significant role in the creation of human capital in the society's younger generations. He places particular emphasis on the role of family and the significance of family life in producing social capital. Family to him is vital to raising a healthy generation and ensuring a healthy society, and this responsibility continues throughout life. Gülen (2002) adds that the same potential for control and supervision of a child's upbringing by the family at home with respect to other siblings and toys is achieved at school through the child's friends, books and proper associations/frequented environment. While Coleman (1988) sees family as the first social capital provider, environment takes the second place. Individuals benefit from social capital not only in their family but also outside their family within the larger community, which comprises all associational and relational networks.

School, neighborhood and other organizations provide individuals with social capital at different levels.

SOCIAL CAPITAL IN EDUCATION

Dika and Singh (2002) claim that there are two major exportations of social capital theory into the educational field. For the first exportation, they state that Bourdieu

(1986) theories of cultural reproduction and of cultural and social capital were developed as alternative explanations for unequal academic achievement, which had already been examined using the skill deficit and human capital theories. For the second exportation, Dika and Singh (2002) point out Coleman (1988) approach and studies, which indicate that greater amounts of social capital- the presence of two parents at home, a lower number of siblings, higher parental educational expectations, and intergenerational closure lead to lower incidence of dropping out of school. Dika and Singh (2002) concluded that social capital and school attainment and school achievement are positively linked and most relationships were significant in the expected direction. To Aslandogan and Cetin (2007), improvement of social capital in an educational context refers to the establishment of tripartite educator-parent-sponsorship (community) relationships and networking. In this context, parental expectations and obligations as well as social networks through family, school and community lead to social capital. Differences in student or academic success can be attributed to different levels of existing social capital which is produced in the networks and connections of families that the school serves. Social capital supports success and education in the form of the disciplinary and academic climate at school, and also the cultural norms and values that motivate students to achieve higher goals. Putnam (2000) states that child and youth development is strongly shaped by social capital in school. Furthermore, networks which lead to social capital within children's families, schools, peer groups, and the community positively affect educational achievement and, consequently, students' behavior and development. This in turn is reflected positively in low dropout rates and higher graduation rates (Israel et al., 2001), higher college enrollment (Yan, 1999), higher achievement on tests (Sun, 1998, 1999), and greater participation in school and community organizations (Sun, 1998, 1999).

Family structure, family discussion, parental monitoring, parent-teen connection, family expectations and obligations, and parents' communication with their children's school and friends (Dika and Singh, 2002) form social capital in school clearly affect students' academic achievement in different ways and manners. Similarly, Aslandogan and Cetin (2007) illustrate the benefit of social capital in students' behavioral development and success. They maintain that teachers who are fully-committed to education, dedicated to academic success, self-sacrificing and altruistic in their manners towards students help attract parents and sponsors (community) towards proper schooling and education. This attraction also contributes to positive publicity and overall success in education, which in turn attracts more parents, community and support. Aslandogan and Cetin (2007) also indicate students would not need explicit instructions in shared norms and values if they witnessed integrity,

truthfulness, trustworthiness, generosity, and respect for the law and for human rights from their teachers and other networks within the family and school. Furthermore, they argue that teachers who exemplify and reflect the universal or ethical values aforementioned prove more effective than textbooks and instruction. Sil (2007) views social networks within parent groups and between parents and teachers as providing common positive outcomes for everyone in school. By focusing on social capital in the form of parental participation, she goes beyond a functionalist approach of social capital theory. Sil therefore claims that family and school partnerships are more important for students' success than family structure, such as marital status, parent's educational and income levels, race or family size. This, however, should not be interpreted as that she does not attach any significance to parents' backgrounds and aforementioned factors. These in fact should be recognized and served if parents need such.

As educational policies are formed, policy makers should take into consideration these factors, identify needs for higher social capital, and address these needs accordingly in order to maximize educational success. As demonstrated earlier, academic studies show that social capital plays a crucial role in overall success in education. In different forms, social capital produces gains and benefits for students in particular and for a society in general. Furthermore, the United States and many other developed countries, as Sil (2007) notes are becoming more multicultural, multiethnic and multi-racial. This may, to a certain extent, impede communication, interconnectedness or dialog among diverse individuals. This lack of communication and dialog manifests itself in the form of decreased participation and involvement, which in turn negatively affects educational success.

SOCIETY SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The central idea of social capital is that social networks have values. It emphasizes the benefits of social networks, such as information, trust and reciprocity. The collective value of all social networks and the benefits that arise from these networks help people resolve individual and collective problems more easily (Putnam, 2000). In terms of educational issues, people use their social networks and involve different phases of education. Different stakeholders' involvement namely: community and state involvement helps to increase the relevance and quality of education. This involvement happens in various ways: by improving ownership, building consensus, reaching remote and disadvantaged groups, strengthening institutional capacity, and so on.

For instance, Francis (1998) study showed that voluntary participation, as evinced within parent teacher associations, school committees and other grass-roots organizations, contributes significantly to local school

infrastructure, maintenance, and security as well as to the promotion of school enrollment and attendance. In this example, social capital among different groups and organizations promotes benefits for overall education including academic success. Accordingly, Heyneman (2002, 2003) states:

School systems are expected to incorporate the interest and objectives of many different groups and at the same time attempt to provide a common underpinning for citizenship... The success of a school system is based in part on its ability to garner public support and consensus and hence its ability to adjudicate differences expressed by different portions of the public over educational objectives (p. 77).

However, these contributions differ characteristically from family involvement contributions. Since more people engage in the process, there are more complex relations and inputs. Accordingly, society's social capital, when it takes the form of educational involvement, has a smaller impact on children's academic performance (Israel et al., 2001). In contrast, in a family there are natural and higher obligations and expectations that shape the relationships, or social capital, between family members. In most cases, parents' involvement in their children's education is simple but effective, and includes methods such as helping with homework and communicating with teachers. Furthermore, written policies and rules regarding parental responsibility for their children's education lead people, perhaps unsurprisingly, to pursue more and better educational involvement.

FAMILY SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

A child's development is shaped primarily by family. Within the family, elements of social capital such as trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity have powerful effects on a child's opportunities and choices, educational success, and behavioral development (Putnam, 2000). Different studies investigate social capital within families with specific focus areas such as parental aspirations, family structure, parent-school connectivity and help with homework (Dika and Singh, 2002). For instance, White and Kaufman (1997) studies showed that parents who regularly help their children with homework create an effective barrier against the negative impact of low socio-economic status and low parental education attainment. In this example, the network between parents and children is employed to contribute to the success of the children's education. Homework assistance was a reflection of the existing social capital within the family. Coleman (1988) defines this social capital simply as: "the relationships between children and parents" that promote success in the field of education. The World Bank (2011)

also adds that acceptance and promotion of education's importance by the family positively impacts children's academic performance in schools. The World Bank gives Coleman and Hoffer (1987) studies as an example for this statement. In this example, significantly lower drop-out rates in religiously- based public and private schools compared to non-religious schools are attributed to family acceptance and reinforcement of school norms and values. Israel et al. (2001) add that children born to well-educated parents tend to perform well academically. These families create an environment where educational achievement is valued and expected. Furthermore, when children are provided with a nurturing environment that provides guidance on behavior, the effects on their educational success are powerful and positive.

Probably the most important study about family social capital was Coleman (1966) research which is titled as "equality of educational opportunity". Now better known as the Coleman report, the study found that parents and home environment are far greater determinants of children's future than the schools. According to this study, parents' roles and background are more important in terms of contributing to school performance. One of the most extensive and best-known studies of American education, the Coleman (1966) report drew data for 570,000 students, 60,000 teachers and 4,000 elementary and secondary schools across the country. Viadero (2006) indicates several findings with an earthshaking conclusion, which was that schools made but a very small contribution to school performance. For instance, the report found that black students started out school trailing behind their counterparts and essentially never caught up-even when their schools were as well equipped as those with predominantly white enrollments.

CONCERNS AROUND ETHICS OF CARE IN UTILIZING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Ethical issues in the field of education can be discussed through multiple paradigms. The paradigms may include viewpoints of ethics of care, justice, critique and profession (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2005). Among those viewpoints, Noddings (1992) discusses and theorizes about the ethics of care and places it at the top of educational hierarchy by stating: "the first job of the schools is to care" (p. 16). She emphasizes that the schools should prioritize process of nurturing and encouraging (caring) students rather than attempting to make achievement. Parallel to Noddings's approach, this paper will discuss social capital with respect to ethical issues in education in terms of ethics of care; indeed, like the concept of social capital, the ethics of care deal with relationships involving care, responsibility, trust, trust worthiness and compassion among individuals and organizations. Noddings's approach to ethics of care can be described as "relational ethics" since it prioritizes concern for relationships (Noddings, 1984 : 5). Accordingly,

Starratt (1994: 52) states that the ethics of care focuses on the demands of relationships from a standpoint of absolute regard. Starratt asserts that the ethics of care sees individuals within the context of relationships, which are essential to one's intrinsic dignity and worth. He emphasizes: (1) fidelity to persons, (2) willingness to acknowledge people's right to be who they are, (3) authentic individuality, and (4) loyalty to relationships as requirements of the ethics of care. Besides emphasizing requirements of ethics of care, Starratt views isolated individuals as half-persons. One becomes whole, he explains when he/she is in a relationship with another or with many others.

Starratt (1994) also addresses characteristics of schools and school communities that are committed to the ethics of care. In his view, the integrity of human relationships should be held sacrosanct, both in school and out of school. Educators should also develop sensitivity to the dignity and uniqueness of each person in the school. To do so, educators can attend to the culture tone of schools. For instance, they can adopt a language of caring that uses humor, familiar imagery and personalized messages rather than the language of bureaucracy. School activities and procedures should also reflect caring, as should the school song and other symbols. This ethic should concern itself with the larger purpose of productivity, such as an increase in the district's average test scores, rather than responding to more immediate concerns, such as efficiency. When successfully applied, the ethics of care as Starratt imagines them are comparable to high social capital in schools and school communities. His suggestion to promote care in and out of school may also be applicable to the promotion of high social capital in other words, when there are people committed to the ethics of care in schools and communities, there is higher social capital. On the other hand, all parties involved in the process of education, including but not limited to, administrators and teachers should not sacrifice the uniqueness and individuality of students for the sake of promoting social capital. Rather, they should try to maintain a balance between these two assets (that is social capital and individuals' unique interests, capabilities, and routes to realization of their potential).

In other words, educators should still cherish diversity in the school and in the classroom, while trying to reap the benefits of social capital. This requires respect for decisions made by individuals and elimination of any overt and covert pressure on individuals to mold them into a uniform identity and/or purpose.

CONCLUSION

In the field of education, specifically in K-12 education, the concept of social capital is frequently mentioned as an important contributor to students' academic success.

In different forms, people's involvement in education has been accepted as the source for social capital, which affects educational success considerably (Aldridge et al., 2002). Especially after the Coleman report in 1966, discussion shifted from whether social capital affects educational success at all to quantifying social capital's presupposed effect on educational success. Different studies, as mentioned previously support this presupposition since researchers positively correlate social capital and academic success even in different educational systems and across cultures. This paper, on a track running parallel to most research, separated people's involvement and the social capital generated from that involvement into two groups: (1) social capital from family, and (2) social capital from the larger society. The family structure, within which relationships and dialogs between parents and children are more frequent and less formal, provides more social capital for educational success. By contrast, society's social capital has less effect on educational success, since relationships that concern or involve educational issues are more formal and left mostly to written policies and obligations.

In conclusion, social capital's concrete benefits for education can be seen as: (1) higher achievement on tests, (2) higher graduate rates, (3) lower dropout rates, (4) higher college enrollment, and (5) greater participation in school and community organizations.

REFERENCES

- Aldridge S, Halpern D, Fitzpatrick S (2002). *Social capital: A Discussion paper*, London: Performance and Innovation Unit.
- Aslandogan YA, Cetin M (2007). *The philosophy of Gulen in thought and practice. Muslim citizens of the globalized world, contributions of the Gulen movement*New Jersey: The Light Inc, IID Press, pp.31-54.
- Bankston CL (2004). *Social capital, cultural values, immigration, and academic achievement: The host country context and contradictory consequences. Sociol. Educ.*, 77(2): 176-179.
- Bourdieu P (1986). *The forms of social capital. In J Richardson (Ed.). Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education.* (pp. 241-258). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Cohen D, Prusak L (2001). *In good company. How social capital makes organizations work.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Coleman SJ (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity.* U.S. Office of Health, Education, and Welfare. Washington, DC: U.S. Printing Office.
- Coleman SJ (1988). *Social capital in the creation of human capital. Am. J. Sociol.*, 94: 95-120.
- Coleman SJ, Hoffer T (1987). *Public and private high schools: The impact of communities.* New York: Basic Books.
- Dika SL, Singh K (2002). *Applications of social capital in educational literature: A critical synthesis. Rev. Educ. Res.*, 72(1): 31-60.
- Field J (2003). *Civic engagement and lifelong learning: Survey findings on social capital and attitudes towards learning. Stud. Educ. Adults*, 35(2): 142-156.
- Francis PA (1998). *Hard lessons. Primary schools, community, and social capital in Nigeria. Papers 420, World Bank - Technical Papers.*
- Fukuyama F (1999). *Social capital and civil society.* Retrieved Feb, 1, 2011, from <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/seminar/1999/reforms/fukuyama.html>.
- Green A, Preston J (2001). *Education and social cohesion: Recentring the debate. Peabody J. Educ.*, 76(4): 247-284
- Gulen F (2002). *Essays, perspectives, opinions.* Fountain. Rutherford

- NJ: The Light, Inc.
- Heyneman S (2003). Defining the influence of education on social cohesion. *Int. J. Educ. Policy Res. Pract.*, 3(4): 73-97.
- Horvat EM, Weininger EB, Lareau A (2003). From social ties to social capital: Class differences in the relations between schools and parent networks. *Am. Educ. Res. J.*, 40(2): 319-351.
- Israel GD, Beaulieu LJ, Hartless G (2001). The influence of family and community social capital on educational achievement. *Rural Sociol.*, 66(1): 43-68.
- Noddings N (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkley: University of California.
- Noddings N (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Putnam RD (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Sil S (2007). Parent-school partnership. *Forked roads to college access*. *Sch. Comm. J.*, 17(1): 113-128.
- Shapiro JP, Stefkovich JA (2005). *Ethical leadership and decision making in education: Applying theoretical perspectives to complex dilemmas*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.
- Starratt RJ (1994). *Building and ethical school: A practical response to the moral crisis in schools*. Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press.
- Sun Y (1998). The academic success of East-Asian-American students: An investment model. *Soc. Sci. Res.*, 27: 432-456.
- Sun Y (1999). The contextual effects of community social capital on academic performance. *Soc. Sci. Res.*, 28: 403-426.
- The World Bank. (2011). *Social Capital and Education*. Retrieved May 2, 2010, from <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/EXTTSOCIALCAPITAL/0,,contentMDK:20186584~isCURL:Y~menuPK:418214~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:401015,00.html>
- The World Bank Social Capital Initiative (1998). *The initiative on defining, monitoring and measuring social capital*. Social Capital Working Paper 1.
- Viadero D (2006). Race report's influence felt 40 years later. Legacy of Coleman study was new view of equity. *EdWeek*, 41(1): 21-24.
- White M, Kaufman G (1997). Language usage, social capital, and school completion among immigrants and native-born ethnic groups. *Soc. Sci. Q.*, 78(2): 385-398.
- Yan W (1999). Successful African American students: The role of parental involvement. *J. Negro Educ.*, 68(1): 5-22.