Building and Leveraging a Principal's Social Capital for Student Achievement

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Abstract

This article discusses building school principals' social capital as a means to foster school achievement among students in their schools. Social capital theory and its essential components are explored as a means for developing strategies for principals to use in creating their own social capital. The article will discuss specific strategies that school principals can employ to develop and leverage their social capital to create positive outcomes for students in their building.

Keywords: Social Capital, Social Networks, Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Introduction

A novice framework for school leaders, but not a new term, social capital theorizes that school leaders must cultivate their social capital to be able to increase the likelihood of their students' academic success in their building. Taliaferro and Seigler (2012) posit that social capital is based on trust, dense social networks, and the value these networks have in terms of producing positive outcomes for students. Furthermore, Rodrigues and Child (as cited in Taliaferro & Seigler, 2012) explain that "engagement with networks may accrue benefits, which otherwise would not be available" (p. 410). Putnam (2000) argues that it is parents' social capital—rather than their financial capital—that produces better outcomes for their children. He argues that it is the connections that parents have that provide their children with opportunities that money cannot necessarily buy. These same principles can also hold true when it comes to school principals' social capital. According to Allen (2012), "the quality of the social processes and relationships within which learning interactions take place is especially influential on the quality of the learning outcomes in collaborative approaches" (para. 3). This idea implies that social capital is important to fostering a learning environment that is conducive for the information exchange needed to accomplish collective action that yields school improvements and sustaining an environment that is ready to adapt and change for future progress (Sergiovanni, 2006). Putnam (2000) found that "social capital matters for children's successful development in life" (p. 299). He also posits that "social

capital index is highly correlated with student scores on standardized on standardized scores" (p. 299). Therefore, it is essential that principals must know how to build, lend, and leverage their social capital, like any other form of capital, to create opportunities for their students that they would not necessarily have access to, based on their own social capital networks. These opportunities, as Gladwell (2008) posits, become advantages in that over time they accumulate, providing one with an edge over one who has not had access to the same opportunities. He explains,

> Success is the result of what sociologists like to call "accumulative advantage" . . . that little difference leads to an opportunity that makes that difference a bit bigger, and that edge in turn leads to another opportunity, which makes the initially small difference bigger still. (pp. 30–31)

Taliaferro and Seigler (2012) contend that "unfortunately, for most poor and minority students, the lack of opportunities within the realm of their educational experiences tends to limit their academic achievement potential" (p. 414).

Understanding the Structural Hole Theory to Leverage Principals' Social Capital

Social capital encompasses many facets. Two constructs of this theory are bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is defined as those intimate relationships that one would have with immediate family members, a spouse, and close friends. These relationships are close knit and tend to be exclusionary, in that membership in this group is based on the intimacy of the relationship. On the other hand, bridging social capital can be described as informal relationships. These relationships tend to be inclusive and include persons who would be   considered more of an acquaintance than a close friend. These relationships offer more opportunities for building and tapping into divergent networks. In other words, bridging relationships offer access to networks that are beyond one's own bonding network, because they extend beyond one's intimate circle. Moreover, membership in bridging circles provides one more access to connections, and thus networks. Typically, persons within our own social purview, bonding circle, have similar social ties and thus, their reach is limited and does not often provide access to additional opportunities. However, the bonding and bridging construct holds value in that its use is predicated upon the individual's need. In other words, as Putnam (2000) states, "bonding social capital is good for getting by, but bridging social capital is crucial for 'getting ahead'" (p. 23). Thus, bridging social capital provides one with a link to untapped social networks.

Conversely, for poor and minority students, tapping into bridging relationships tends to be more difficult. That is, typically poor and minority students have strong bonding social capital. These students often have very close knit relationships with parents, grandparents, and other kinship relationships with members of their social group. These relationships are valuable, and provide a strong support network and system for its group members. However, these relationships are also insulated and provide limited to almost nonexistent opportunities for its members to join bridging circles that would provide them access to more social capital. Edwards (2006) explains that members of socially excluded groups can be "gathered and trapped together in social networks that have developed identities and values that fly in the face of dominant norms" (p. 1). These exclusionary memberships for poor and minority students create gaps that exist between their bonding social capital and their access to bridging social capital.

School leaders can close that gap by working as a connector for these students between these two constructs to provide them with more access to opportunities that would

develop their social capital. As Burt (1998) explains, "Leaders with more social capital get higher returns to their human capital because they are positioned to identify and develop more rewarding opportunities" (p. 11). In other words, these leaders act as brokers of opportunities for students as well as bridges for them. Burt (1998) describes this concept as the structural hole theory. According to Burt, the structural hole theory defines social capital in terms of the "information and control advantages of being the broker in relations between people otherwise disconnected in social structure" (p. 7). In short, as Burt explains, "the manager who creates a bridge between otherwise disconnected contacts has a say in whose interests are served by the bridge" (p. 10). Thus, the principal serves as the link between untapped and tapped opportunities and social networks for students and other stakeholders within their school community. In this capacity, the school principal leverages their social capital to create opportunities for students that might be otherwise unattainable.

Individuals who are impoverished educationally and financially tend to remain in poverty because they lack the connections that could help them (Putnam, 2000). Woolcock and Narayan (2000) state, "What is true for individuals, moreover, also holds for groups . . . those communities endowed with a diverse stock of social networks and civic associations will be in a stronger position to confront poverty and vulnerability" (p. 3). For school principals, building their social capital is critical for the academic success of their students because it can provide insulation against the effects of poverty on students' academic achievement. In short, people in poverty often lack the necessary social ties that could put them in a position to take advantage of opportunities and networks that would provide them with the ability to transcend their current circumstances. This lack of opportunity affects individuals economically as well because of the lack of social connections to job opportunities, promotions, and other benefits that would help them financially. The same premise is true for school leaders and their schools. In order to mitigate the effects of poverty in their schools—the lack of funding for program development, professional development for teachers, extended day programs, summer programs, and additional enrichment and remediation programs for students—school leaders must develop their social capital through well-connected social networks so that they will have more opportunities by tapping into resources when needed. Edwards (2006) posits that "social capital concentrates as . . . a set of resources that are linked to membership of a particular social group . . . the emphasis on social networks that provide access to that groups resources, with the outcome being enhanced economic rewards and social power" (p. 1). Moreover, these networks create beneficial relationships for the borrower and the user in that they provide members of the organization a support network.

Building Social Capital Requires Developing Interpersonal Relationships

If there are no major modifications in schools' financial resources or policies changes to alter the status quo, principals need strategies for ways to become empowered through social capital and change current practices to improve student achievement. Principals' use of strategies that improve their social capital to strengthen and connect many existing aspects of their social networking structures may foster constructive improvement in teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

One such strategy that principals can use is to focus on developing great interpersonal relationships. These interpersonal relationships can lead to increased social capital if those relationships are utilized in a beneficial way. Building interpersonal relationships is not necessarily planned because they can be fostered anywhere (Bolton, 2011). Some

connections begin in a personal capacity and extend into professional bonds, while professional allies frequently develop into longstanding friendships. The greatest approach to building relationships is to think about it from the perspective of what can you do for other people, instead of what other people can do for you. This mentality fosters relationships and networks (i.e., social capital; Bolton, 2011).

Joining Well-Connected Network Groups

Another strategy principals can employ in building their social capital is to join well-connected network groups. Joining well-connected network groups is about developing one's bridging social capital. There is a distinction between well-connected groups and groups that are not well connected. The importance of joining well-connected groups is that the benefits of these groups are two-fold. The individual will benefit from the connections of these groups because the productivity and resource capacity is greater in well-connected groups. Also, there is the concept of "spillover" in groups that are well-connected. In other words, by mere membership in this type of group, one benefits because of the overage of social capital that the group has regardless of the member's participation. Putnam (2000) explains,

> a poorly connected individual may derive some of the spillover benefits from living in a well-connected community. If the crime rate in my neighborhood is lowered by neighbors keeping an eye on one another's homes, I benefit even if I personally spend most of my time away from my neighborhood. (p. 20)

Moreover, it is better and more productive for an individual to be a part of a well-connected group. The return on the investment in social capital will be greater for that individual, as well as the community in which that individual serves. As such, school principals not only increase their social capital by being a member of a well-connected group, but they benefit personally as well. The principals' school community also benefits because as Putnam argues, "social capital also can have externalities that affect the wider community, so that not all of the costs and benefits of social connections accrue to the person making the contact" (p. 20).

Conversely, membership in well-connected networking groups provides an immediate reference group for individuals who share common interests and experiences, as well as provide an opportunity for working together to reflect on issues that influence the organization. Network groups can create links between individuals who would not easily form connections. They provide real and concrete opportunities for individuals from different backgrounds to learn from one another. More significantly, network groups provide the opportunity to link across professional and social sectors. There is an opportunity for individuals from diverse sectors to connect in order to acquire insight from each other and develop productive and hopefully ongoing relationships.

However, a point of consideration when selecting networks is to choose a network based on "what it can do, not for the type of people who people who pick it" (Burt, 1998). The point is that participation in networks can have career implications for school leaders. Therefore, it is important to select networks that will directly benefit principals and their school community.

Principals may consider different "meet-up" style groups in the local area that relates to their interests in relation to hobbies or learning something different. These groups tend to have people from diverse backgrounds, professionally and socially. Bridging associations to different people is possible. Another consideration for principals is joining professional associations. A recommendation is for principals to join and become active on the board, and

to take advantage of opportunities to attend the association's conference as an attendee or as a presenter. The strategies will allow principals to capitalize on the knowledge of others in their profession and develop critical connections to individuals, businesses, and resources that can benefit their school.

Developing Mentoring Relationships

A third strategy for building principals' social capital is to develop mentoring relationships. Hamilton and Darling (1996) define mentoring as a coordinated style of social support in which the mentor transfers knowledge and exhibits socially and accepted behaviors for the mentee (as cited in Cumming-Potvin & MacCallum, 2010). We would also add to this definition the modeling of professionally accepted behaviors for the mentee. There is an assumption and inference in most definitions of mentoring that the mentor is generally older, more experienced, and wiser than the mentee; thus, the mentor has access to resources that the mentee would not otherwise have. Mentoring relationships straddle the three components of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. Initial support includes focusing on bonding and then expanding into bridging relationships. Over time these relationships develop into situations where the mentor advocates for the mentee within their local and wider social and professional communities, giving them a linking emphasis and access to resources. "Kerka (2003) argued that individuals who are able to draw on social capital resources and relationships have enhanced life opportunities; on a broader level, communities which are characterized by strong trust and social networks benefit from collective action and cooperation" (as cited in Cumming-Potvin & MacCallum, 2010, p. 316), such as school improvement for increased student achievement.

Principals may consider seeking out mentors who are in leadership, but not necessarily in school leadership. Developing mentoring relationships with individuals outside a principal's current profession not only allows for growth and development in areas that are relevant to education, but also provides a more well-rounded skill set. As Burt (1998) asserts, "having a more distant strategic partner . . . adds a corroborating external voice" (p. 27) that can help principals develop their social capital by providing them access to networks that may have been prohibited. In short, strategically developing a mentoring relationship outside of one's area of expertise, but in one's field, helps to legitimatize membership in specific groups. In other words, principals may have to borrow social capital from mentors in hierarchical membership groups until they can increase their social capital. In this capacity, mentors act as "sponsors" for school principals, providing them access to certain networking structures.

Moreover, having multiple mentors provides an avenue for learning different perspectives from diverse people who are committed to helping one grow into a great leader. This provides an opportunity to cultivate social capital that may produce access to more diverse resources that can benefit the school, in addition to building social capital that students may be able to exploit.

Tapping Into Current Relationships through the Principle of
Mutual Exchange and Ethical Retributive Responsibility

Current relationships have elements of bonding and bridging. These relationships are those that are more personal with a high level of trust and commitment. These relationships may not be with people who are necessarily "well-connected," but they can serve as bridges to increasing one's social capital. These are people who you have supported. These people

are more likely than not to share their social capital with you. As Taliaferro and Seigler (2012) explain,

> The Principle of Mutual Exchange and Ethical Retributive Responsibility asserts that if you operate on the assumption that someone's actual asset is presumed to be your retrievable asset through mutual benevolence, then it is becoming on all parties to provide actual assets to another who may need retrievable assets. That is, your assets (the benefits of social capital) are dependent on how readily available these assets are as well as how others' assets (those within your social capital network) are available to you. (p. 412)

In other words, the principal's level of social capital is also dependent upon its readiness of retrieval by others as well as themselves. That is, the networks that one develops are only as valuable as the use of those networks when tapped into for specific situations. These networks are interdependent in that the principal's social capital can increase or decrease depending upon their readiness to be available to their network structures when needed. As Bourdieu (1986) explains, "social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition . . . which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, credential which entitles them to credit" (p. 9).

Conclusion

In order to transform schools to create positive outcomes for students, principals should recognize that leveraging their social capital is necessary for school achievement. Opportunities in life are often predicated on "who you know and who knows you." This is the essence of social capital. For poor and minority students, the opportunities for creating bridging social capital is limited. Therefore, when these students are in need of additional resources to complete homework, or for their parents to attend conferences or participate in enrichment activities, their opportunities are limited. This conundrum requires that principals begin to question the extent to which their leadership orientation creates trust, opportunities for civic participation, and cross-institutional cooperation among teachers, parents, and the community. School principals should understand the importance of social capital and its formation from a range of levels, from school level interactions between individuals, families, and communities to a larger level of engagement across the key institutions of civil society (Hampshire & Healy, 2000). More importantly, principals must understand how leveraging their social capital is essential to raising achievement outcomes for students in their building by creating opportunities where there were none. In the words of Gladwell (2008), in order to close the educational gap, we must first close the opportunity gap.

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