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## What are we **learning about...?**

Community leadership in networks

# Leading together to build social capital

John West-Burnham & George Otero

Community Leadership Strategy

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

# Leading together to build social capital

**This think piece** discusses the need for educational leaders to grow social capital in order to increase student achievement. For this to be achieved, we argue that educational leadership within the contemporary context requires a shift of emphasis. This shift involves a move away from a focus on school improvement which is driven by individual schools organising and acting as singular institutions, towards a focus on increasing the value of social capital by creating and sustaining effective educational communities.

***“Community leadership is all about the relationships.”***

In this paper we explore both the underpinning ideas and the practicalities involved in developing community leadership in ways which guide the enactment of leading together to build social capital. In the light of this discussion, we also explore the role of school networks and how they can increase social capital through dialogue and building relational trust. □

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**Kate Bond and Maggie Farrar,**  
**Lead Developers**

## The need for social capital

**“ Statistically, the correlation between high social capital and positive child development is as close to perfect as social scientists ever find... ”**

Putnam *et al*, 2000

*Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) sets out the aim to maximise the achievement of every single child. But what happens when increased investment, technology and teaching effort no longer measurably increase student achievement? There is a case for arguing that results at a national level have reached a plateau and significant improvements in attainment levels are increasingly difficult to secure.

This would seem to suggest that the time has come to explore alternative avenues of enquiry as we strive to understand the influences on student achievement and develop new strategies for maximising achievement for all. One starting point in undertaking this task is to focus on the social environment of the learner and the effects that deprived communities have on educational outcomes. While social disadvantage is not an excuse for poor achievement, it is an explanation.

**“ (Educational) outcomes in deprived areas are worse than those in non-deprived areas, whether they are measured in terms of qualification, attendance, exclusions, or staying on rates. Inner city areas in particular feature as having low outcomes. ”**

Power *et al*, 2002

In considering this explanation however, it is important to be clear that such definitions of deprivation necessarily need to embrace more than an understanding of the effects of economic poverty. As we are reminded by Field (2003): “*Social poverty is as negative and destructive as economic poverty*”. In the education sector, attempts to tackle the issue of social poverty within the schooling system have historically been characterised by school improvement efforts. When schools concentrate their efforts internally on improving their own school or organisational system, this creates bonding, introspection and institutional integrity. However, it also leads to detachment and compromises engagement and networking – the very basis of social capital.

On this basis alone, there is a strong case to be made for shifting the emphasis of our improvement efforts – and by implication our leadership practices in education – beyond an institutional or organisational focus, to one which acknowledges the relationship between the building of social capital in a networked context and its influence upon educational performance.

**“ By making connections with one another, and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things that they either could not achieve by themselves, or could only achieve with great difficulty... We can conclude with some confidence that there is a close relationship between people’s social networks and their educational performance. ”**

Field, 2003

If educational success is a function of high social capital, then educational leadership has to make the development of social capital a high priority. As Mulgan (2001) points out, learning will increasingly take place beyond educational institutions as policies for knowledge reach far wider than formal education, and issues such as diet, housing and the effects of poverty are identified as directly affecting cognitive development and educational performance. In this way of thinking, if academic standards are to be raised in a sustainable way, then school leaders will be required to see their role in terms of a broader social function which centres on their contribution to the creation of social capital, as opposed to a narrow emphasis on improving classroom practice. □

*“A school that is visible in society can be seen as a ‘social school,’ a school that is of the community not just in the community.”*

## Building social capital within school communities

The theory of social capital can be summed up in two words “relationships matter” (Field, 2003). The importance of this relational dimension is reflected in the core components of most of the models of social capital which have emerged from current thinking and practice.

### The building blocks of social capital in most models include:

- trust
- engagement and connection
- collaborative action
- shared identity
- shared values and aspirations

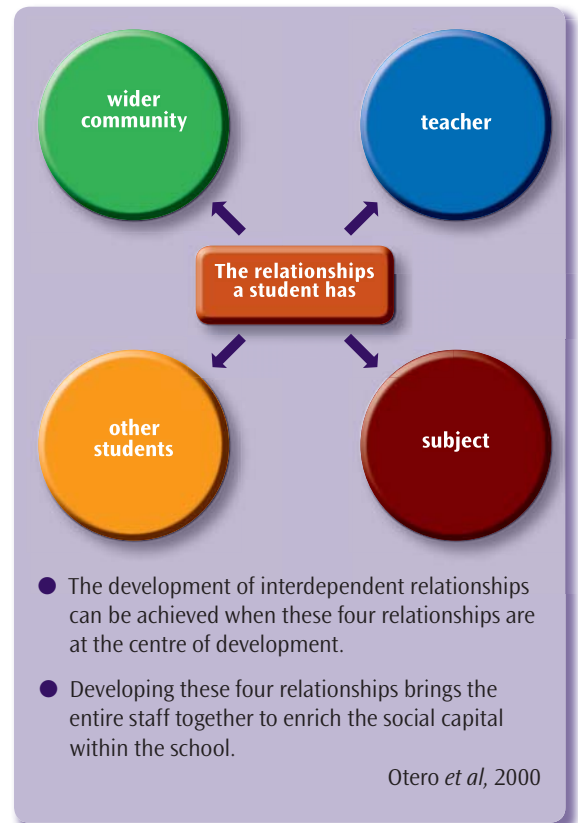
So, how do we actively create social capital within school communities? By focusing on and improving relationships, schools can begin making a contribution to developing the entire community’s capacity to learn.

Schools need to look at community involvement completely differently. If they continue to see themselves as providers in a contractual public service arrangement, then there is little hope of engaging others as true partners in the educational process.

An initial way of approaching this challenge is to think about the community within the school, and the four main relationships that a student has (see figure 1). By focusing on strengthening these relationships, schools can enrich social capital within the school community. □

Figure 1

The Relational Learning model



Pause for thought...?

*What does building social capital mean in your context?*

**“Trust is the connective tissue that holds improving schools together.”**

Bryk & Schneider, 2002

## Building relational trust and dialogue

**Finding better ways** to bridge community and school is the essence of the school leader's role. Schools are living human systems and survive and develop by integrating differences. One way of achieving this is by transforming the relationship to the community. This involves building bridges to change attitudes, relationships and the deployment of resources. Two powerful strategies for doing this are building relational trust and promoting and practising dialogue.

### Relational trust

A ten-year study of Chicago school reforms concluded that schools with a high degree of 'relational trust' are more likely to make the kinds of change that help raise student achievement. Without trust and bridging relationships to support the community goals, improvement in schools is difficult to sustain. Bryk & Schneider (2002) suggest four signs for identifying and assessing relational trust in schools.

#### Four signs for identifying relational trust in schools

- 1 Respect** – do we acknowledge one another's dignity and ideas?
- 2 Competence** – do we believe in each other's ability to fulfil our responsibilities?
- 3 Personal regard** – do we care about each other enough to go the extra mile?
- 4 Integrity** – do we trust each other to put children's needs first even in the face of tough decisions?

Supporting the improvement of relationships in this way can be seen as critical to both school improvement and community transformation.

### The practice of dialogue

Since our relationships are defined by the quality and content of our communications, one powerful tool schools can use to engage and work with the community is through a culture of dialogue. At its best, dialogue transforms us as individuals, whilst increasing our shared understanding and emboldening our collective will.

**“In our view, there is no surer route to community building and to fulfilling the promise of democracy and lifelong learning than through the deepening of good, ongoing dialogue. Such dialogue can increase student achievement, transform teaching and learning and renew relationships that connect communities to schools.”**

Preskill *et al*, 2000

Developing skill in dialogue takes time and practice. School leaders have an obligation to create spaces where dialogue can be learnt, valued and practised on an inclusive basis amongst all members of the network or school community.

*Pause for thought...?*

**How might relational trust and dialogue be built in your context?**



**“Civic renewal is impossible without passionate, engaging dialogue ...dialogue unleashes creative possibilities for our schools and our communities.”**

## Building relational trust and dialogue

Interactions in schools can be characterised as being governed by three types of conversation. Understanding these conversations can help us improve the quality and content of our relationships. All three conversations are enhanced when dialogue is the medium of exchange.

### Three types of conversation

- 1 Instructional conversation** – most commonly seen in the classroom. This dialogue is about acquiring a skill, extra knowledge or guidance that is external to ourselves.
- 2 Learning conversation** – closer to a conversation where our mutual growth is the end result. The relationship and the task get equal attention.
- 3 Community conversation** – a vehicle for people to express and share the diverse views that they hold, to negotiate and reaffirm directions and vision and to develop social capital. This type of conversation depends on the art of dialogue the most.

Dialogue is a vehicle through which schools can interact with the community. In order to build bridges to engage the whole community, community dialogue needs to be developed and a culture of dialogue introduced. Effective dialogue skills need to be taught at all levels of the community, from classroom discussions to council meetings. Using dialogue will increase our capacity to learn from each other through democratic discourse, despite major differences in experience and viewpoint, and can lead to decisive civic action that promotes social justice and mutual respect.

### Eight signposts of a culture of dialogue

- 1** practising ‘power *with*’ not ‘power *over*’
- 2** caring as much about questions as answers
- 3** growing comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty
- 4** striving to *be* as much as *do*
- 5** caring as much about the learning of others as our own learning
- 6** devoting as much energy to listening as speaking
- 7** valuing the process of witnessing the thoughts and feelings of others as much as we appreciate individual reflections
- 8** leaving ourselves open to being changed by the conversation

There are many ways you can begin to engage in dialogue with the communities you serve and across the networks in which you work. These could be small-scale conversations at the school gate, or more structured opportunities to discuss needs and ideas with parents, residents, other service providers, faith leaders and local politicians. The ‘signposts of a culture of dialogue’ outlined above, may provide a useful starting point for reviewing your practice and that of your school, network or community. In particular, they may help you to identify the kind of conversations you currently engage in, and point the direction towards both the building of relational trust and the promotion and practising of dialogue within your community leadership activities and roles. □

*Pause for thought...?*



**How might you use community conversations to build social capital in your context?**

## End piece

**The research** presented in this article suggests that sustaining school improvement is only achievable through enriching social capital.

These perspectives on education in the community have significant implications for our understanding of the nature of leadership. The focus has to move from improving the school as an institution to developing social capacity. This movement from reaction to prevention involves significant restructuring of how educational leadership is conceptualised.

Educational leaders are very well placed to provide leadership in the community however, it would be wrong to pretend that such a change is easy. Only through the commitment to build capacity, engage in dialogue, develop trust, and work within networks to share learning, can leaders hope to be able to contribute to the building of social capital amongst their school community or network members.

Schooling is a necessary, but not sufficient, component of education. The purpose of schools is to help families and communities educate young people. In this way of thinking, it is important that the development of community leadership accounts for the impact of social networks upon outcomes for learners. Furthermore, this requires that, in the enactment of leading together to build social capital, the improvement and success of schools is seen to be actively derived from engagement *with* their communities, not *in spite* of them. □

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