Developing Social Capital in Schools

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Abstract This article discusses how change in our economy after mid 20th century made the acquisition of social capital an important factor in school succes and future life functioning. Because traditional education was not using a relationship and development based approach, groups without adequate mainstream social capital were not faring well in school. The article describes how the Yale School Development Program engaged the students, parents and staff of two of the lowest performing New Haven, Connecticut schools in a process that used child and adolescent development and public health principles; intentionally creating a school environment that promoted social capital that facilitated school success and potential for life success. It describes the source of the conceptual understanding for this approach; the social policy obstacles, and a way that a strong community based approach that supports social capital acquisition could have a positive ripple effect in the nation.

There are different definitions of social and human capital. I understand social capital as the relationships, norms, and trust acquired in meaningful networks that provide individuals and groups with the capacities to gain the training and tools, or human capital, necessary to participate in the economic and related mainstream networks of our society. Such participation provides productive and economic benefits to individuals; and/or social and human capital for the society (Putnam 1993, 1995; Coleman 1988; Woolcock 1998).

Until the middle of the 20th century most people did not need an education or significant social or human capital to earn a living and to take care of themselves and their families. An agricultural and then heavy industrial economy made physical strength the key requirement for work force participation. Most lived on farms and small towns in family centered networks of relationships and norms; shaped by various social structures, belief systems and security needs, particularly economic. Cohesive forces were reasonably strong and expectations were clear.

By the end of the century most lived in urban-suburban centers with much physical mobility, rapid and visual communication; with resultant less social cohesion and less clear expectations. The possibility of social and economic mobility increased for a time; slowing in recent years. To function well in these more complex situations individuals needed to acquire *social and human capital commensurate with the structural changes*; the society, for the common good, needed to promote such change (Reich 2002, 2010; Carnoy and Carnoy 2009).

Education became a key to the acquisition of work related social capital, but also made social capital a key to the acquisition of education. Schools are mainstream institutions with attendant norms and expectations. Individuals acquire social capital in the social and economic networks around them—family and the friends, kin and meaningful contacts of the family network; the networks of school and work; economic and governance networks at all levels. *Positive interactions with knowledgeable and meaningful family or caretakers in mainstream cultural environments at home facilitate the acquisition of social capital needed for school success* (Comer 2004). Reasonable economic wellbeing makes positive interactions more possible.

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Adequate personal development in such environments—social-interactive, psycho-emotional, moral and ethical, physical, linguistic and intellectual-cognitive—begins to motivate students to gain capacities to self-regulate their bodies and minds. This is human capital development, the acquisition of tools and training, facilitated by an individual's social capital. This interactive process enables the young to gradually take responsibility for their own personal development. This knowledge, skill, and disposition become the "stuff" or essential ingredients of desired home and school learning, and life management success. Participation in a labor force that requires more than physical strength is more possible when these processes take place.

The need to promote social and human capital among all poses a significant challenge to our nation. Our education system(s) benefitted too few because they are based on outdated science which holds that brain development and learning is determined primarily by genes; leading to a notion that school performance capacities are predetermined; that some can learn well and some can't (Herrnstein and Murray 1994). Some groups, immigrants before assimilation and the acquisition of significant group power, and African-Americans, to justify slavery and abuse, were thought to be intellectually inferior by many. Political, economic, and social actions gradually changed laws and policies supporting this viewpoint but residual effects still influence education policy and practice (Comer 1972).

For many years a significant number or social and behavioral scientists have argued that learning and behavior is determined by biology and the environment, but with many dissenters. For more than 30 years now neuroscience knowledge has shown convincingly that brain development and capacity is determined by an interaction between an individual's *genes and the environment* from before birth, forward; and that learning and behavior is greatly influenced by the quality of both (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; Sternberg and Grigorenko 1997). Nonetheless the notion that performance is predetermined continues to be the case among many educators, education institutions, and the American public.

Over time this has led to education practice that focuses more on academic learning than on creating school environments or cultures that promotes student development that facilitates academic learning and preparation for mainstream life as adults; or social and human capital. Schools do compensate for the underdevelopment of some students, but too few. Education has not built an adequate storehouse of knowledge and skills about how to provide social and human capital to and for students and families who, for whatever reason, lack such capacities (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education 2010; Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2007).

Before the mid twentieth century most students ill served by misguided school beliefs and practice left or underperformed in school, and were eventually absorbed into the economy through employment that did not require a reasonably good or high level of education, social and human capital. It is important to note that the schools, public or private, serving students from better educated families pay significant attention to promoting training and tools that go beyond academic learning. And even more importantly, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that present and future economies cannot absorb students who do not have the social and human capital needed for work and citizenship (Wilson 1999, 2012).

In the balance of this article I will present and examine our Yale Child Study Center (YCSC) holistic and clinical-like approach to understanding and addressing the obstacles to creating a system of public schools that provide poor, more often socially marginalized minority students, with the social capital necessary to participate at the level of their potential in the economic and social mainstream of our society.

Incremental Understanding

We began our YCSC work in 1968 in New Haven, Connecticut with a choice of working in two de-facto segregated schools and a school racially integrated through bussing. I chose the segregated schools because my life experience and training suggested to me that the underlying problem was that the troublesome quality of the school environment contributed more to underachievement than the fact that almost all of the students were African-American.

We decided, with a research methodologist, that a holistic, participant-observer approach would be most useful. The two pilot elementary schools were King and Baldwin (later closed and replaced by a similar school, Brennan). In 1969, or the end of the first project year, they were 32nd and 33rd in achievement of 33 elementary schools. They had the worst attendance and behavior records. With no change in the racial or socioeconomic make-up of the schools, in 1983 King and Brennan was tie for the 3rd and 4th highest level of academic achievement, and had the best student and teacher attendance records in the city, with no serious behavior problems (Comer 1988a).

We began by living in the schools in their ordinary state of operation. Our strategy was to learn from authentic practice—using a largely child and adolescent developmental, treatment, public health and ecology skill and knowledge base—and in collaboration with parents and educators, make social capital changes that would greatly improve student development and learning. Informed observation of all aspects of practice by all participants in the schools, a holistic approach, would support useful changes (Comer 1980, 1995). Parent and school collaboration prevents relationship, norm difference, and trust problems that are possible when the home and school networks are significantly different. I will describe the framework of structures and processes that arose from our experience in

more detail below; as well as the way we came to understand the major underlying cause of school change inertia.

We engaged in model planning and early intervention between 1967 and 1983. We field tested our process model in about 10 districts into the early 1990s. In 1990 we received support for national dissemination after demonstrating that we could train trainers from other districts to create effective models in their own districts. Almost simultaneously we created University—School District based partnerships to test an infusion of our holistic and developmental approach into both public schools and collaborating partners from universities; six partners for a sustained period. We participated in federal government supported comprehensive school reform programs and rural school improvement efforts into the mid-2000 period. And since that time we have been focused on educator preparation through national, state and local programs. We learned from these multiple experiences and perspectives.

Intervention

I had argued previously that schools could compensate for the early difficult experience of many students; and provide them with mainstream social capital. But our schools could not compensate. Because of fragmented, uncoordinated activities, and poor communications, the schools were dysfunctional (Comer 1980, 1995). In the first year our two social workers, working in traditional ways, had spent 65 % of their time with students from six poorly functioning families but had little success with the students or their families; and their effort had little impact on the chaotic school environment.

The levels of distrust and animosity among all had to be reduced. This occurred gradually as our social and behavioral science team—two social workers, a psychologist and a psychiatrist—helped educators and parents work differently and successfully with students. We helped then move from a control through punishment mindset to a focus on providing students with developmental capacities needed to be successful in school.

For example, a 4th grade student who had made much progress toward functioning well began showing signs that he was upset—angry, fighting. Just before Christmas recess he angrily knocked over his desk. In the control through punishment era he would have been sent to the principal for punishment. Acting from a support for growth perspective his teacher noted that he appeared upset and offered to help. He began to cry and explained that he was looking forward to his father coming home from prison on a pass for the Christmas holidays. For some reason the pass had been taken away. His teacher expressed an understanding of his feelings, and then helped him think about a response that was less harmful to him and his classmates. She helped him write a letter addressing both his father's and his own disappointment, and his anticipation of a visit later on.

The incident strengthened the emotional tie between the student and the teacher, deepening his social capital, and enabled him to become even more available to the work and primary mission of the school—academic learning. The school and all of its activities became a more positive and helpful place for him. Each experience of support helps students acquire a sense of being valued and belonging that in a usually good environment builds to an increased capacity to learn; deepening human development. Distrust between home and school among and between students, staff and parents are weakened and mainstream social capital is acquired by non-mainstream families.

Each "victory" gradually opened skeptical participants up to the more challenging building or system wide organization and management changes that were needed. Our SDP team was then able to help school staff create the structures and processes needed to more fully support student development and learning. The pilot schools had changed so that they could now provide students with relationships that helped them gain a sense of belonging, mainstream norms, trust, and hope that helped students, parents and staff work together for common cause; academic learning and preparation for mainstream adult life.

This changed way of thinking and working could not be mandated or even taught in an abstract way. The model had to enable the participants to identify underlying challenges and needs, scaffold change to help create solutions, and in the process feel ownership and responsibility for the outcomes, and adjust them when they were not satisfactory.

Our SDP team was guided by our knowledge that development and learning are inextricably linked, and takes place best through interactions between a child and meaningful people in warm, supportive environments. *Thus, the structural and process changes were designed to create such conditions*. Improved student development and learning, and in time mainstream social and human capital acquisition flowed from these conditions. In such environments adults can help each other and students, and students can help each other.

The process was operationalized by the creation of three teams, or structures, three guidelines, and three operations. They evolved over the early years as we moved to first decrease the most troublesome problems, and then prevent them by creating the kind of school climate and culture students need to develop and learn. These nine elements became a framework for change; but not a prescription. They were created through discussions among participants as we all engaged in problem solving, positive culture building, and improved academic achievement. Our SDP team role was to share our observations in the participatory process, but in a way that brought child and adolescent development knowledge and skill application to these discussions.

The teams: School Planning and Management Team (SPMT); Parents (PT); Student, Staff, Support Team (SSST). The guidelines: no fault problem solving; consensus decision making; and collaboration. The operations: creation of a Comprehensive School Plan (CSP), staff development needed to carry out the plan, and periodic Assessment and Modification or adjustment of the plan,

The prime drivers among the elements are the SPMT and the CSP. The SPMT, made up of representatives of the key adult stakeholder groups—educators, parents, etc.—identified needs, set goals, devised or designated the creation of both academic and social interventions and monitored the process. They established a Comprehensive School Plan (CSP) designed to address the social and academic needs and goals of the building or school as a system. Through the SPMT and the CSP the schools had an "engine," direction, goals, goal related strategic plans and purpose; and the people they represented had a sense of ownership, belonging, and responsibility for the outcomes. These elements of the framework promoted flexibility, individual and group creativity and innovation, but kept the participants focused on moving toward desired outcomes.

The guidelines became meaningful as they were modeled by the SPMT and were carried out with increased fidelity as they reduced conflict and promoted order and an opportunity for success for everybody. Staff development focused on strengthening capacities to meet real and immediate school challenges rather than abstract and not immediately relevant issues. And Assessment and Modification, using program guidelines, promoted reflection and corrective problem solving; and inherent accountability, without negative judgmental thinking.

Because the Parent Team is represented on the School Planning and Management Team their participation provides insight to and support for the academic program of the school; and direct involvement in the promotion and implementation of the social program; real tasks, ownership and a sense of belonging. The SSST, made up of all the service providers—social workers, psychologists, others—help their educator colleagues think and apply principles that promote child development and learning; and help individual and groups of students with special needs. Prior to the formation of this team each support staff operated individually and did not communicate or collaborate. One child, previously, was being seen by seven different helpers who were not communicating with each other. Such fragmented service is ineffective in helping children; and contributes to a sense of duplication and confusion in a school.

Finally, and most importantly, in order to continue to improve, the social and academic programs of a school must be very intentionally integrated in a way so that students can have experiences that help them gain capacities needed for school and life success. Again, our SDP focuses on six such

capacities or developmental pathways and or outcomes—physical, social-interactive, psycho-emotional, moral-ethical, linguistic, and intellectual-cognitive. These are taught and learned tools and a kind of human capital that is more important today than ever before. The experiences should be provided in a way that engages and then stimulates students to take responsibility for their own development and success. School activities—stories, history, projects—that help students think about pathways of functioning in themselves and others are most meaningful.

Projects that supported developmental pathway growth were the key to improving the academic achievement levels in our pilot and subsequent successful schools. But before describing this outcome I would like to discuss how my insights about the developmental pathways and their relationship to social and human capital came about; indeed, about how the question of why schools were not adequately serving poor and minority children came about.

My Story and the Acquisition of Social Capital

I was doing my internship in my hometown of East Chicago, Indiana, planning to become a general practitioner of medicine in 1960–61. I noticed that three of my best friends from my elementary school days were on a downhill course in life—alcoholism, chronic mental illness, and crime. My four siblings and I achieved 13 college degrees. But I knew from many interactions that my three friends were just as intelligent and could have been successful; even though they were not successful in school (Comer 1988b).

We attended the same good, racially integrated school that served a spectrum of students from the lowest to the highest income in the city. Our parents were all poorly educated African-American people from the Deep South. They had similar jobs as steel mill laborers and domestic workers. My mother had less than 2 years of formal education and my father had about six. The trajectory of my friends and that of other high potential African-American students confused me and led me away from my original plans. I needed time to think and explore.

While doing my military service time in Washington, D.C., I did volunteer work with intelligent and socially able children who were soon to be on the same trajectory as my childhood friends. This realization led me to deeply ponder the difference in outcomes between my upper-lower class social status family and my same status friends and others. I wanted to do something to enable such young people to succeed.

My interest in prevention led to the University of Michigan School of Public Health and an interest in ecology or interactions between people and their environment; the work of Fritz Redlich (Hollingshead and Redlich 1948) and Albert Solnit (Solnit et al. 1963; Senn and Solnit 1968) and adult and child

psychiatry training at the Yale University School of Medicine. My training and experiences as a physician, in public health and psychiatry, particularly milieu therapy, and child development contributed to my focus on family and community interactions and their impact on the development of children and/or students. All of these experiences helped me better understand the difference in outcome between me and my siblings and my childhood friends and others. And my background as a physician and therapist led to my greater interest in intervention than experimental design research.

I came to understand that although my parents had been employed in low-income work they had acquired significant social capital. In years before the birth of children my mother was a domestic worker for several of the most well educated, affluent and most influential people in our town. She was a smart, responsible, sociable, disciplined, and caring person; thus, well liked. My father was a respected leader in our Baptist church, was highly regarded among the workers and supervisors in the steel mill, and even the "man on the street" tipped his hat to him when our family passed by on the way to church on Sundays. Our African-American physician's son was left with our family when they went to social affairs in Chicago, and we had play dates at their home; as well as the homes of some of the White families my mother had worked for previously.

These relationships led to numerous opportunities—Chicago Cub ball games, circuses, museums, school sponsored trips, social organization trips and more. And later on they led to summer employment and special jobs that helped us finance our college educations. Before every visit my mother coached us on the kind of behavior that would be useful; "talk enough to be interesting, but not too much." Before one out of town school banquet she pointed out whom to watch if I could not figure out which behavior was most appropriate; a classmate from one of the mainstream families she had worked for. That is how she gained knowledge of mainstream skills years before. Domestic work is the way many immigrant and migrant families gained such skills.

I eventually realized that the social capital needed for school and life success is not systematically provided in most public schools serving non-mainstream families; that most educators do not understand its usefulness to school and life learning. Other sources of social capital are fragmented, weak, and periodic, and often not meaningful, difficult to connect with and use effectively. The result is that there is rarely a strong bridge to mainstream school and life for non-mainstream children and families.

Social Capital Acquisition in School

An incident at King School contributed greatly to my realization that we were building that bridge but needed to do so more intentionally. On election day the large hallway of one of the schools was used as a polling place. A teacher who warmly greeted her students in that area was unhappy about that. But it caused me to fondly remember how my mother worked as a poll watcher and involved me in the process. I thought about my many mainstream experiences. They had been stimulating, fun, and piqued my interest in learning and being involved in mainstream events. I realized that mainstream children, and those who were not but had access, received mainstream social capital as they grew up in their families; and used it in school and life as I had. This led to the creation of a project in the pilot schools called, "A Social Skills Curriculum for Inner City Children" (Comer 1980, 1997).

Our Yale team considered the personal development and social science principles relevant to this idea; mainly the immediate and long lasting social capital benefits.

We asked parents and school staff what outcomes they wanted for their children and students in the future. They wanted the same things that most mainstream parents want…policeman, doctor, business, good person, and so on. Together we thought about the kind of social and school experiences they would need to achieve these goals and work and live in these ways as adults. Through parent participation we merged social capital sources—home and school relationship networks–and avoided the potential tension and conflict inherent in school activities that are different from usual family activities and culture.

The SDP nine element frameworks were now functioning well. The schools integrated the Social Skills Project into their Comprehensive School Plan. We decided on four project units that would cover much of the adult life experience for which students would need mainstream social skills—politics and government; health and nutrition, economics and business, and spiritual-leisure time. The units were designed to provide academic, arts and athletic, social skill experiences that involved educators, parents, students in school and the community; and to bring important people and activities from the community into the school when possible. The first unit was on politics and government and had a powerful, memorable impact on all involved.

The students composed letters of invitation to the three mayoralty candidates inviting them to the dance-drama program that would be the culmination of this unit. The Parent Team used funds from their activities to rent buses to take students and staff on a tour of the city in order to think about the role of government and political leaders. On return they discussed what they observed and the responsibilities of political and government leaders and the public. They studied local, state and national government.

With teachers and parents the students developed and practiced a dance-drama program. And again with parents and teachers they worked on all the social skills necessary to host the affair. The culture of the school had already established that it is not appropriate to laugh at or ridicule a presenter who

is having difficulty, but to help if possible. A teacher was out of sight but nearby to back-up all the student presenters with major speaking roles. The students had been taught how to raise challenging questions in a respectful way. And the mayor, in particular, helped them think about their responsibilities as citizens.

Some students who did not do well academically displayed excellent interactive skills and had an impressive personal presence. Some teachers were greatly surprised by the talents that some students had that were not apparent in classroom academic work. This led to different approaches to engaging them and improved performance. The outstanding performance of the students and the approval and appreciation of the parents, school staff and public officials had an immediate and galvanizing impact on the school. They came to believe in each other and themselves; and their potential for success in the future. After this unit some parents who had never voted in elections before registered and voted.

In all the units activities were co-constructed by students and adults, and carried out in a way that integrated academic and social skill enhancement, as well as artistic and even athletic expression where possible. After the first year of the Social Skills project the achievement test scores of the students in the two schools jumped for the first time, 7 months. The gains moved up 3–4 months each year until they were significantly above grade level in language arts and mathematics on the test that was being used district wide; before statewide testing. Again these two pilot schools had the best student and teacher attendance in the city and almost no serious behavior problems. In one school there was no teacher turnover for 13 years. Many parents were motivated to take jobs they did not think they could qualify for previously and some were motivated to return to school themselves.

Our Yale team was able to use the basic nine-element SDP framework in more than 1000 schools up until the mid-2000 period. External and internal studies indicate that about a third of these schools experienced significant school culture and academic achievement gains, about a third made good improvement, and about a third did not improve. The outcomes were very much related to the degree of staff buy-in to the critical concepts and the continuity of the staff and leadership of the improved schools; and the willingness to train new staff. In an exhaustive meta-analysis of the 29 best known comprehensive school reform programs in the country SDP was identified as one of three Comprehensive School Reform models "meeting the highest standard of evidence" or significantly raise test scores (Borman et al. 2003).

Social Policy, Schools and Social and Human Capital

Eventually, it became clear that the underlying resistance to buy-in to a development based, holistic approach is the kind of preparation educators receive. One experience is a striking example of the problem and the need for education related social policy change.

A Co-Zi elementary school (Comer-Zigler) school went from lowest achieving in the district to the top academic achiever in the third year. The school superintendent called the principal in and said, "You know your kids can't do that well." They had to take the test over under central office supervision. The low-income African-American students involved—having had a school experience that supported their development and learning—did even better on the repeat test. Putting aside possible race based influences, his main problem was the lack of understanding of how children learn; and that an environment that can promote adequate to high level learning for all students can be created.

He compounded the problem by removing the successful principal so that he could teach the other principals without providing the opportunities, resources and support necessary to carry out a complex development based process (Personal communication with Dr. Herman Clark 2008).

Such understanding among leaders permeates a system and is reflected in building and classroom teaching and learning. It is malpractice. Unfortunately it is not uncommon and is extremely harmful. But it is not useful to criticize or ridicule such performance; but very important to understand its roots and promote social and education policy that can bring about corrective change.

As mentioned, education has not adequately incorporated the last generation of neuroscience knowledge that provides convincing evidence that it is brain-mind-environment interaction and development that determines learning capacities; and therefore should inform curriculum, teaching and the preparation and selection of educators; administrators, teachers, and support staff.

Strangely, after a generation of finger pointing, only now are we exploring the role of programs and schools of education that prepare teachers and administrators, principals and superintendents at the district levels; and state, regional and national education leaders. And what we find is that educators are not being adequately prepared to promote child and adolescent development in school. An NICHD-NCATE-Foundation for Child Development report in 2010 indicated that 10 % of the schools of education do not offer such courses. And 65 % of the programs and schools that offer development courses do so through programs outside the schools of education which means that the application of the principles in practice can't be experienced before internships, often not before becoming a teacher.

Schools are relationship "hothouses"—students, staff, parents, others—with the futures of children and the country depending on how well they are managed. And because preparatory programs focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, educators are not being fully prepared to do what they

must be able to do to be successful in practice. This is a major reason that about 45 % of all new teachers have left the profession in 5 years (Hunt and Carroll 2003. Social and/or school policy at the local, state and national levels must focus on making the integration of personal development and curriculum, instruction, and assessment knowledge, and how to apply it in the classroom, building and district practices.

The monograph, The Road Less Traveled, issued in 2010 by NCATE provides important suggestions for local, state and national policy changes as well as exemplars for integrating developmental and learning sciences. But time, established curriculum requirements, the wish for a quick-fix, financial interests and more will make the needed changes difficult to bring about.

On the other hand, the growing focus on early childhood education, and the continued loss of able young people may well lead to the creation of the kind of models and frameworks, and pressures that can create the kind of preparatory, induction, and professional development programs that are needed. This is most likely to happen when informed local political, economic and education leaders come together to address their common interests; the need for effective human capital, the prime drivers of our economic future and the future of democracy. Successful models can have powerful ripple effects.

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