

Community Education and Social Capital

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Recently, the term ‘social capital’ has re-emerged as a concept that has strong relevance to community educators. As a concept that existed primarily in the world of sociology, social capital adds an important dimension to the theory and practice of Community Education in building partnerships between school and community. Social capital provides a compelling argument that lifts the role of Community Education from being an ‘add-on’ or ‘feel-good’ program to one that has primary relevance to the success of K-12 education and to the building of healthy, vibrant communities.

The quality of our schools bears a direct relationship to the quality of life in our communities. Consider the following statements. “The community school is a school which has a vision of a powerful social force.” “The role of education is seen to be more than intellectual training. The school is viewed as an agency for helping give direction to community growth and improvement... it is directly concerned with improving all aspects of living in the community... the community school is a unifying force of the community rather than merely a social institution in the community.” These statements -- by Maurice Seay, Paul Hanna, and Robert Naslund, respectively -- appear in a groundbreaking booklet on community schools published in 1953 by the Society for the Study of Education in its 52nd yearbook (Henry 1953). In 1972, Jack Minzey and Clyde LeTarte defined Community Education as:

...a philosophical concept, which serves the entire community by providing for all the educational needs of its community members. It uses the local school to serve as a catalyst for bringing community resources to bear on community problems in an effort to develop a positive sense of community, improve community living, and develop the community process toward the end of self-actualization. (Minzey and LeTarte 1972)

The phrase “sense of community” was later used by the C.S. Mott Foundation as the title for a film about Community Education. These educational pioneers, as well as many others, have long espoused the public school as more than a place for academic study by the youth of a community. They believed in a broader social purpose that puts the school in the center of community building.

How is social capital relevant to this discussion of quality schools and quality communities? First and foremost, social capital is a very real commodity every bit as important as financial and human capital. In the article by Todd Berry, head of the Wisconsin Taxpayer Alliance, he presents his view of the importance of building social capital as a critical priority for school success (Berry 2003). Drawing on the work of James Coleman who presented the concept that there are three types of ‘capital,’ Berry presents a compelling case for educators to

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build 'social capital' as a priority equal to that of building financial capital. It should be noted that the Wisconsin Taxpayer Alliance is recognized in Wisconsin as the premier analyst of government finance and expenditures. Berry's recognition of social capital as a critical ingredient to successful K-12 education provides an important link to the work of Community Education.

If building social capital should indeed be a priority of schools, what role should community educators play? As community educators, we have long debated the role (definition) of Community Education. This debate was in the forefront during the 1960s and 1970s when the Mott Fellowship program in Flint, Michigan, brought together educators and the national leadership in education. This unique setting contributed to a national dialog on Community Education as graduates from this program left Flint and began their work in schools and universities across the United States. Is Community Education a program that provides lifelong learning opportunities, extended use of school buildings, and cooperating programs with community agencies? Is Community Education a process that strengthens schools and communities through trained leadership that assesses community needs and facilitates the development of lifelong learning opportunities for all citizens? These questions were typical of the program/process dialog.

In recent years, the dialog about the mission of Community Education has diminished. With the closure of the Mott yearlong training program and the gradual reduction in regional training centers, Community Education has shifted to a more regional or state focus that has become more program focused. Much of the program emphasis is driven by funding opportunities, such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers after-school programs, that call for specific program outcomes. The dialog about the role of Community Education lies largely dormant. However, the emergence of social capital as a 're-discovered' concept provides the opportunity for a new dialog about the mission and importance of Community Education as a primary vehicle for building social capital.

Yogi Berra said, "If you don't go to someone's funeral, they won't come to yours." While Yogi's logic can be questioned, he makes a good point that forms two of the pillars of social capital, that of reciprocity and trust. Reciprocity means that if someone does you a favor today, you trust this person to return the favor at some point in time. Where this is absent in a community, social capital is low. In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2000) uses an example from the Gold Beach, Oregon, fire department. For their fundraiser, the fire department advertised the event by saying "Come to our breakfast, we'll come to your fire." In other words, do a favor for us now, and, at some point in time, we will reciprocate. (Trust us!) It is the idea of trust that is at the core of what most sociologists would say is the essence of building strong social capital.

The building of social capital happens at all levels in a school district. Social capital is built when one individual trusts another to 'chair the carnival committee.' It also exists between an individual and a school when a parent 'trusts' the school principal to make good on the promise to re-do the lunchroom schedule so students have adequate time to eat. It is easy to see how a lack of reciprocity, and the resulting lowered trust level, can result in decreasing social capital. Consider this example. The president of the club does not 'trust' his friend to chair the

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carnival committee. The meeting ends in disagreement, and the carnival does not take place. In the lunchroom schedule example, consider what happens if the parent camps on the doorstep of the principal, because the parent does not ‘trust’ the principal to follow through on the promise to re-do the lunchroom schedule. As a result, the principal retreats from involving parents and makes a unilateral decision that is challenged at the next board meeting. The resulting trust levels evaporate to the point where future cooperation becomes almost impossible.

Research supports high levels of social capital as important to the health of an organization. Such notables as Robert Putnam of Harvard University, James Coleman of the University of Chicago, Cornelia Flora of Iowa State University, and Gary Wehlage of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, among others, have provided important research on social capital (Putnam 2000; Coleman 1987; Flora 2001; Wehlage 1996). One of the first mentions of social capital comes from the writing of L.J. Hanifan in 1916. He wrote about norms of reciprocity that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. His premise was that concentrated networks of interaction foster better understanding, a broader acceptance of group norms of behavior, and, consequently, a more effective accomplishment of both individual and community goals. This introduction of the concept of ‘mutual benefit’ is important to the discussion of social capital. As with ‘trust’ and ‘reciprocity,’ mutual benefit means that, over time, building strong social capital benefits both sides, school and community. It is obvious that a one-sided benefit destroys both trust and the willingness to reciprocate. Take our previous example of the school principal and the lunchroom scheduling problem. The principal forms a parent committee to advise on a solution. The committee makes a recommendation that is ignored by the principal. The bond of trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit is broken, and the school’s social capital is diminished.

John Gardner, one of America’s most prominent statesmen, wrote of the need for the modern community to promote wholeness that incorporates diversity (Gardner 1995). In other words, do not expect that every person or every group in a community should act or believe the same. Gardner believed that communities need to provide multiple avenues of expression and participation that respect the diversity inherent in most of today’s communities. Today’s communities may be less of a melting pot and more of a tossed salad. A melting pot mixes everything into a single identity with a new, uncertain taste. A tossed salad has individual ingredients each of which retains its separate identity, but it all tastes great together.

The entire community, all of its citizens, contributes to the building of social capital. Is it enough that a school district networks and includes only a segment of the community? Does a school district build social capital if part of the community is not ‘connected?’ If a school district forms networks and connections that are exclusionary, it probably benefits those community members who are included, but certainly has a detrimental effect on the greater community good. Social capital is diminished if the outcomes do not promote the greater good of the community. For example, the local Lions Club and the Klu Klux Klan both have membership requirements and promote trust within their organizations, but there is an obvious difference in that one helps build community social capital and one destroys it. The decision about what builds social capital and what destroys it can be found in the concept of ‘inclusion.’ The greater community good is served if there is an opportunity for participation and a voice from all sectors of the community.

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Social capital as an actual ‘commodity’ adds a unique dimension to the role of Community Education. First and foremost, it calls for educators to address the school’s role in building school-community partnerships (i.e., Community Education) as a primary function of schools, one that stands with equal stature to seeking financial resources and managing the school-day curricular programs for youth. Educators and school boards need to recognize that building strong social capital with the community leads to a ‘mutual benefit,’ not a one way street that sees school-community partnerships as feel-good programs for the community that have little relevance to the ‘real’ work of schools. In other words, when educators gain the trust of the community, the community will respond in kind with a greater willingness to support the goals of education. Building social capital needs to be recognized by all educators as a priority that has a direct benefit to the bottom line of school operation.

The social capital concepts of trust-building, reciprocity, and mutual benefit fit very well with the social mandates of the community-centered school. School districts that do the best job of building social capital often do not recognize this as a special school program or initiative. They work with all of the community in an unselfish goal to build a better community. They do it, because this is just the way it should be done. A school district builds social capital over time. The idea that social capital is an immediate quid-pro-quo or public relations ploy misses the point. Building social capital has to be an on-going effort that involves everyone from the superintendent to lunchroom staff. It means that educators need to go beyond the rhetoric of inclusion and finds ways to give all sectors of our changing communities a voice in determining educational opportunity. It means that every school needs to be a community school. What better way is there to build the true ‘community school’ than through Community Education?

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