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Social capital and its influences on pupil education: external connections matter

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Abstract

This paper outlines an ongoing research project that employs a social capital lens to explore the external educational influences on young people throughout their primary and secondary education. It explores the internal and external networks that pupils engage within the school environment and beyond. This article briefly provides an insight into the study, the methodology employed, and provides some initial findings based on the pilot of pupil questionnaire and discussion responses. The findings raise questions about the recognition and recording by schools regarding pupil external activities.

Keywords: social capital, pupil participation, out-with school activities, and educational enhancement

Introduction

This article is relevant to an international audience who are concerned with the importance young people place on out-of-school connections and how they feel this impacts on their education. Whilst this article mentions the new Scottish 'Curriculum for Excellence', it is not focused on Scotland; it mentions this curriculum as this was the focus of in-school learning for the young people involved in this research.

In 2004 the Scottish Government launched Curriculum for Excellence, a new, transformational approach to the delivery of the curriculum from the ages of 3 – 18 with one of the intentions being that it would provide a streamlined, progressive curriculum enabling young people to gain the knowledge and skills needed for the 21st Century (Scottish Government, 2004). This curriculum aims to develop four capacities in young people that fit with the purposes of education as defined by the Scottish Government. The capacities to be developed throughout a young person's education are listed as: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors. These new capacities encapsulate the overarching aim that young people should develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to enable them to flourish in their life and in their learning and work, both in the present and the future (Scottish Government, 2004). The introduction of Curriculum for Excellence and the above four capacities triggered this research paper, which describes an ongoing research project employing a social capital lens to explore how external influences may impact on young people's education.

This research explores the internal and external networks that pupils engage with, in the school environment and beyond. It investigates the extent to which these networks contribute to a young person's view of education and their view of transferable skills. This article does not focus on the debate surrounding the purposes of education.

Social capital

Social capital theory has received increased attention as a way of thinking about the importance of networking, trust and norms on the education of young people. The concept has developed considerably since Coleman (1988) asserted that the amount and quality of family

based social capital had an impact on the levels of academic achievement generated amongst students. Its application in education and learning has since been widened and used to examine the relationship between social capital and issues such as academic achievement (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, Morgan & Sorenson, 1999); drop out rates (Croninger & Lee, 2001); aspirations (Israel, Beauliue, & Hartless, 2001); and lifelong learning (Field, 2005). Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch's 1995 study of young Mexican immigrants also highlighted that the formation of ties to significant others, such as teachers and guidance staff, was as important as socio-economic status in student achievement, thus suggesting that the presence of a role model and engaging with that role model, was significant in shaping identity. This finding has been confirmed by Catts (2009) who, when examining the role of social capital and young people suggested that the presence of significant others was an important factor in shaping young people's identity in the transition to the workplace.

Preece & Houghton (2000) used a social capital framework as a means of analysing the successful involvement of previously excluded groups in community learning programmes. They also claimed that fostering role models could have a positive impact on those who had previously not engaged with education, thus increasing the community capacity in learning and development. Drawing upon an action research study which investigated the impact of a community access programme, they argued that there was a role for universities in engaging those who had previously been excluded from higher education, if barriers were removed and more flexible provision was made available. This, they suggested, would impact on social capital as well as human capital as certain forms of behaviour were nurtured thereby increasing the individuals' ability to participate in a range of networks.

Other studies have illustrated the 'dark' side of social capital. Thomson, Henderson, & Holland (2003) for example, illustrated that in some communities, the bonding nature of social capital could have a negative impact on young women and their career aspirations, suggesting that notions of 'success' within their communities did not readily include staying on at school or participating in non compulsory education. Similar findings had been reported by Morrow (2001) who suggested that whilst some friendships established and maintained at school provided support for academic achievement, those who did not achieve academically could find themselves marginalised.

Dika & Singh (2002) examined the relationship with social capital and educational achievement and established a positive association. However, the studies they reviewed focused largely on parental influence in the education of students. Less work has been done in examining the impact of the student's own connections. Indeed Dika and Singh have expressed a need for further research into the influences in education in accessing and mobilising social capital.

The above studies indicate that social capital as a concept is increasingly used in examining not only how confidence and aspirations are influenced by our immediate communities, but also the conditions under which people make connections with others, within and outside their immediate environment and in recognising the benefits and drawbacks associated with it. Furthermore, the importance of developing the skills to recognise and access valuable social capital is regarded as a key employability skill (Hill, 2011). Mobilising social capital has been recognised as a key component of personal and professional mobility (Hatala, 2007; Belliveau, 2005; Renzulli, Aldrich and Moody, 2000). It is therefore important that young people are aware of how to access social capital and of the benefits that this can have for them now and in the future. If young people

are to benefit from social networks then they must have access to such networks.

The majority of school aged young people are embedded in their locality (Reay and Lucey 2000), be this a city, industrial or rural locality. Social capital comes not only from their immediate family but also from a young persons locale (Morrow, 2004; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004). Access to clubs and out of school activities may in part depend on the mobilisation of the young persons social capital networks to enable their participation such as the potential for their parents to take them to clubs and activities both within and outside of their locale. Raffo and Reeves (2000) found that localised social capital networks, those that are strongly embedded in the immediate neighbourhood, are often passive and static in relation to "individual change and development" (p. 156). Diverse social capital networks appear to enable young people to draw on a wider range of support and resources to aid personal mobility Field (2008), White & Green (2011). It is therefore important that school aged pupils and their parents are aware of the benefits to them of accessing social capital networks and how these can aid their personal development.

The utilization of a social capital lens in examining the aim of young people as being not only successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens, but also effective contributors to society is important. Educators are being asked to provide children and young people with the opportunities to develop these capacities, and also for the evidence needed to demonstrate that these capacities have indeed been met. If the four capacities referred to earlier are seen as being the purpose of education and are therefore to be achieved by all young people, then much greater consideration needs to be given to the role that social capital and the opportunity to develop new social capital can play.

Research Project

This project aims to discover how external influences may contribute to young people in becoming successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. However, the project has a wider educational impact as it aims to demonstrate how being able to access and mobilize social capital has a bearing on the formalized education of children and young people.

From the beginning this project was driven by a qualitative methodology with a clear emphasis on interaction with children and young people and their views and opinions. The rationale for this methodology was based on the fact that the project aims, identified above, emphasised the need to examine pupil views and opinions. According to Humphrey and Ainscow (2006) and Smith (2003) qualitative methods are by their nature concerned with exploring the perspectives of participants and examining their experiences, therefore credence was given to this as the selected methodology.

The key questions that this part of the project aimed to answer were:

- To what extent do school pupils utilize social capital networks?

- What types of social capital networks are primary and secondary pupils accessing?

- How do pupils view the links between these social capital networks and formalized learning?

The pilot study was based within one education authority and involved 18 pupils, from two schools, School A and School B. The pupil distribution was as follows:

- 6 pupils from primary school – 2 pupils from each of the last three years of primary education,

- 12 pupils from secondary school – 2 pupils from each of the 6 year groups in secondary education.

School A – a non-denominational primary school had approximately 300 pupils at the beginning of this study. The pupil absence rates for this school were at the national average. School B is a non-denominational secondary school and had approximately 1000 pupils at the start of the research, the absence rates for this school were below the national average. The percentage of pupils receiving free school meals in both schools is below the national average. Both of these schools are based in a semi-rural area but have links to a large city, which is approximately 20 minutes away. According to recent census figures the authority that the schools belong to is an extremely homogeneous one with very little migration from outside the authority's catchment area.

To ensure the anonymity of the schools and local authority involved the pupils will only be referred to using the following system: a letter representing the sector and a number representing their year group e.g. P5 is a primary year 5 pupil and S3 is a Secondary year 3 pupil. The research project was explained to all participants and full permission was sought from each pupil participant and their parents/carers at the outset of the study. Questionnaires were designed for both primary and secondary pupils. These covered the same topics and areas but were differentiated through the language employed to ensure that they were age appropriate. The pilot questionnaires focused on two of the purposes of education as defined by the Scottish Government. These were to enable all children and young people to be responsible citizens and effective contributors. Both schools had spent time developing and understanding the purposes of Curriculum for Excellence with pupils and staff and had devoted extra resources to this. Each of the four capacities is developed within the Curriculum for Excellence documentation with exemplification provided as to what

the capacities may entail, see appendix 1. The capacities focused on during the pilot phase of the project (Responsible Citizens and Effective Contributors) contain the following exemplification:

- Make informed choices and decisions

- Develop informed ethical views of complex issues

- Understand different beliefs and cultures

- Communicate in different ways and in different settings

- Work in partnerships and teams

- Take the initiative and lead

- Apply critical thinking to new concepts.

It is these headings that formed part of the initial questionnaire formation.

The questionnaires were undertaken during the school day with both researchers visiting each of the schools together. The pilot group of pupils were brought into the same room by their teachers and the purpose of the questionnaires and the research project shared with them once more. The young people then completed the questionnaires and returned them to the researchers, ensuring that there was a 100% return rate.

Pupils were also involved in focus group discussions about the types of activities they participated in within and outside the school. These discussions encouraged participants to identify how these activities helped with their education. The focus groups not only allowed pupils to discuss fully the types of activities they were involved in and how these benefitted them but crucially, provided pupils with support before they started to think individually about their responses. This support was essential as some of the young people were aged 8 and 9 years old and this helped them to focus on the questions and their answers. These groups also allowed the researchers to begin to gain an understanding of the main issues and concerns of the participants. Powell,

Single and Lloyd, (1996, p.499) stated that a focus group is 'a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research'; this was true in the case of this study. The researchers recognized the issues that such groups can raise including researcher or respondent bias or the creation of expectations from participants, (Cohen & Manion, 1989; Rudduck & McIntyre, 1998; Gay & Airasian, 2000); therefore to ensure the authenticity of the emergent data various methods were employed such as triangulation and negative case analysis (Padgett, 1998). The researchers also worked jointly and visited the schools and pupils together, this ensured that research notes from the focus group events could be analysed and ultimately researcher bias minimised.

Data analysis

The findings from all data sources were analysed qualitatively following the procedures advised by Merriam (1988), Miles and Huberman (1994) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992). Basic quantitative analysis focused on tallying up numbers of responses, totalling responses to certain categories and converting these totals to percentages. Accumulative network maps were constructed based on each sector. These maps gave a pictorial view of the various networks that pupils were involved in and explored how participants understood the ways in which in-school and out of school activities, clubs, and forms of work contribute to their education and development. The rationale for such an approach is based in the fact that we wanted the findings to be meaningful to the education profession.

Findings

Analysis of both the questionnaire and focus group data highlighted two main themes; that of communication and team work. These were themes that pupils returned to time and again in either their written or oral responses.

Communication Skills

As we generally expected, the range of people that participants reported they interacted with grew as they progressed through their schooling. The responses demonstrated that due to increased responsibilities and maturity young people were increasingly allowed by parents/carers to run errands to local shops either alone or with friends. This in turn raised the number of possible interactions with others that the children may have including shop keepers and neighbours. Also, due to increased maturity and responsibility young people reported part time paid employment that involved communicating with a wider range of people such as shop working, paper rounds and restaurant work. Elements of increasing maturity and responsibility highlight the possibility that as young people mature their opportunities to engage with social capital networks may also increase. This will however not be true for all young people and there may come a time when although the element of maturity is still increasing, young people's social capital networks may in fact plateau.

The majority of primary pupils focused on family and close friends in relation to communication, whereas secondary pupils began to focus more on social networking and professional networking such as work experience (S5, S6), voluntary work (S6) and weekend jobs (S5, S6).

It is interesting to note that every participant focused on out of school activities as a means of 'communicating with different people', with few of the younger people mentioning school as a place where they communicated with others. Analysis shows that out of 38 activities and/or places mentioned by primary pupils as allowing them to communicate with different people, only 4 of these (10.5%) were school based, whilst in secondary school out of 40 activities 11 (27.5%) of these or were in school activities.

The young people in both groups (primary and secondary school), identified that they communicated differently with their parents and teachers than they did with friends and adults in clubs that they may be attending. The main differences focused on the tone of the language and the type of language employed:

"More slang and abbreviations" (S2)

"Speak to teachers and parents nicely, but to friend I laugh loud" (P5)

"You don't need to watch what you're saying to friends" (S5)

This demonstrates that pupils, from a young age are aware of differences in the means of communication and use this knowledge to help them when communicating with others. It appears from the data that this group of young people select the appropriate means of communicating depending on the social circumstances. The questionnaires did not explore the reasons for this difference in communicating but discussions within the focus group raised the importance of 'fitting in', 'easier to speak like everyone else', and 'they know what I mean when I speak like them' and 'teachers expect you to speak proper but they don't always do it as it can be confusing at times' and 'why can't we just say what we mean'. Therefore, to ensure acceptance in a social network the young people conform to the accepted norms of this network in relation to appropriate communication.

Working as a team

The young people involved in this research, were asked to identify where they felt they worked as a team, both in and out of school. Primary pupils identified 32 activities in which they worked as a team, 62.5% of these were out of school activities. The secondary pupils identified 30 activities of which 66.7% were out of school activities.

It is interesting to note that few of the pupils identified class activities as opportunities for them to work as part of a team. Where school was identified, it was certain named activities and groups that took precedence such as 'Assembly' or 'Enterprise Group'. This could be due to a number of reasons such as being a focus of the school year or children may have just finished an assembly before the focus group etc. This is an area that needs further investigation during the main study to discover why class 'group activities' appear not to be counted by these young people as a way of developing team work.

Compilation of network maps demonstrated that participant perceptions of where they participate in and gain practical understandings of team-work activities changed as they progressed through the stages from primary to late secondary school. Initially the pupils involved focused only on out of school activities that aided in their development and understanding of team work. However, this changed in the final year of secondary school where participants identified in school activities as having the greatest impact on the development of their team work.

When identifying how they developed team leadership skills 40% of secondary responses mentioned school and teachers as being instrumental in the development of these skills, whereas 27.7% of primary pupils mentioned school and teachers. This is something that needs to be examined in more depth in the main study so that we can discover the team leadership skills that young people value and where they think they gain these skills.

Discussion

It appears from the data collected that the majority of the young people involved in the pilot study accessed social capital networks in the form of out of school clubs and activities within their own locale. Older pupils who had secured part time employment mainly worked within the immediate locale or within a 6-mile radius of their school as travel was an issue in respect of them

having to ask someone to take them to their paid employment or their ability to access public transport at appropriate times and costs.

The issue of communication was one that pupils referred to on many occasions, both in the way that they communicated with different networks and the way that others communicated with them. All pupils mentioned social networking sites on the internet as a means of communicating with friends, both the known friends and the 'people that have added you on facebook'. These are people that the young person may not actually know but may be a friend of a friend, a distant relative, or someone that notices they share the same interests on the social networking site 'Facebook'. The young people all mentioned that they used 'text-talk' as a means of sending phone messages to friends but when sending messages to adults such as their parents they tended to text full words and not abbreviations as otherwise their parents may not understand. These different means of communicating are worthy of further investigation in the main study as they provide a picture of how literate these pupils are, even as young as eight years old these young people have picked up on the social conventions of types of acceptable language for different groups. Throughout primary and the early years of secondary school the pupils involved in this study identified out of school activities as being the ones that mainly helped them develop teamwork and leadership skills. This changed however in the later years of secondary school as pupils began to identify the school as being the main place that they developed leadership skills. This may be due to the fact that participants that were involved in the pilot study as the upper secondary school pupils, all held positions of responsibility within the school such as school prefects, deputy head boy/girl or head boy/girl. Therefore they would have lots of opportunity to develop leadership skills and responsibilities. This is an area that will be focused on during the main study as there will be more

participants from the upper secondary sector that do not hold positions of power within the school.

It is interesting to note that the pupils involved in this study found it difficult to relate their out-of-school activities to school. They had difficulties in making the links between the skills they learned and how this could help their education, in effect their personal development. It is essential that young people can recognise the benefits of social capital networks to their development and can utilise these to ensure their personal development.

Next steps

The pilot study allowed the researchers to trial the questionnaires to ensure that the language used was appropriate for participants but importantly it also provided us with the opportunity to identify certain areas that needed more in-depth study and which will be focus points during the main project.

One of the main questions that will be focused on in the wider study is pupil achievement and the links with access and mobilization of social capital, particularly bridging and linking social capital. This is an important area for consideration as educationalists are focused on ways to close the attainment gap and the recognition of these links may be one way in which this can be done although it is too early to generalize whether this is the case or not.

From the pilot study it became apparent that the majority of the pupils were only accessing local networks. During discussions between the researchers we began to think about the role of the school in 'filling gaps' to try and ensure that pupils are given equal opportunities to participate in networks. Linked to this is the issue of how school and communities ensure that pupils have access to comparable opportunities irrespective of their locale. How can we ensure that pupils from a rural background can access and mobilise

social capital? These are areas that we will be considering in the main study.

It is essential that external activities are recognised and valued by schools as these can add value to pupil understanding, skills, and knowledge. The pupils in the pilot study did not mention how they shared information relating to wider activities with school staff, and again this is something that needs to be considered.

The wider study will include teachers, headteachers, and pupils. It is apparent that one group alone cannot provide all the answers to such questions if we are to have meaningful discussions regarding the importance of social capital on young people's education and personal development.

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