Social capital and early childhood education

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Background

The claim that early childhood education benefits children, families and communities is of critical interest to educational leaders in schools and other community institutions. Indeed, a growing body of international research literature attests to its benefits for children's learning, health and well-being (Ball, 1994; Pascal et al., 1999). An allied area of research focuses on the benefits of integrated services (within schools and other facilities) for children, families and communities, using a social capital framework (Tayler, Tennent, Farrell & Gahan, 2002; Tennent, Tayler & Farrell, 2002)[1].

Premised on Morrow's (2001) notion that social capital in a community impacts the well-being of its members, our construct of social capital includes micro-social individual behaviour and macro-social structural factors, thus setting "social relationships, social interactions and social networks in context" (Morrow, 2001, p. 4). Another theoretical dimension of our work is derived from the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 1998), where children are theorised as active social agents and reliable informants of their own experience, who construct and shape the social structures and processes of their lives (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003).

Social capital

Social capital is a highly contested theoretical construct (Fine, 1999; Foley & Edwards, 1999; Gamarnikov & Green, 1999; Hawe & Shiell, 2000). Its conceptualisations range from Bourdieu's (1986; 1993) sociological account of different, yet interrelated, forms of capital (social, economic, cultural and symbolic), to Putnam's (2000, 1993) popularised notion of social and community networks, civic engagement and the norms of cooperation, reciprocity and mutual trust. Social capital has been championed by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (2000) as one of five key determinants of social and family well-being, and is claimed to reduce social and educational disadvantage (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Stone, 2001).

While social capital may be touted by government and its agencies, rigorous description, measurement and analysis of the phenomenon prove challenging. Moreover, measurement instruments, such as those used by Putnam (1993), are characteristically applied to adults as community members and citizens with little scope for inclusion of children's accounts of their social experience (with Morrow's [2001] British work on children's networks a notable exception).

Researching children's social capital

In redressing the relative absence of research into children's social capital and despite its methodological complexities, our work, like that of Morrow (2001), uses multi-method approaches to explore children's everyday experiences in school, their social networks and their communities. Research participants were 138 children (aged 4-8 years) from four Queensland

schools (two rural and two urban). Children were invited to engage in informal conversations with the teacher/researcher based on six dimensions of social capital[2]:

- feelings of trust and safety

- tolerance of diversity

- participation in community activities

- neighbourhood connections

- family and friend connections

- altruism

Children were also asked: *Why do you come here? What do you like about coming here? What don't you like about coming here?* And, additionally: *What would a new person need to know to be happy here?*

Findings[3]

Social capital

On the social capital dimensions, rural children reported lower levels of trust than did their urban counterparts, while in terms of safety, the majority of children in both communities agreed that they felt safe.

The rural children were less likely than urban children to agree that they would help a friend with schoolwork, explaining that this was *'cheating'*. The rural children were also substantially less likely when compared to urban children to agree that they liked being with people who were different from them (48% compared to 90% for urban children). The apparent acceptance of

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[2] Adapted, with permission, from Onyx and Bullen (1997).

others may stem from the ethnic diversity of the urban locality, and increased awareness of difference (potentially developed in schools) may help to increase rural children's ease at being with people who are different from them.

More than twice as many urban children as rural children were members of clubs or groups and urban children were more likely than rural children to visit friends/relatives/neighbours. Many in the rural community lived some distance from social amenities, and school offered the primary opportunity for socialisation outside the immediate family.

Why do you come here?

A clear majority of preschool children, in both communities, believed that they came to preschool simply because they *like it*. Unlike preschoolers, Year 1 children cited, in addition, practical issues such as proximity of school to home or choices made by parents. Interestingly, in Year 2, 'to learn' became the primary reason and by Year 3, children's responses focused on attributes of their school.

What do/don't you like about coming here?

The most enjoyable aspects of school were *learning activities* (preschool and Year 1) and playing with friends and outdoor games (Years 2/3), while the negatives clustered around bullying, often at the hands of older peers (see also Farrell, 1999).

What would a new person need to know in order to be happy here?

Preschool, Year 1 and Year 2 children focused on emotional support to newcomers, while Year 3s were primarily concerned with knowing names, rules and routines, thus corroborating earlier

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[3] This paper provides a brief aggregated summary of aspects of the data set. For further details of the data set,

research on children's emerging awareness of the school's social geography (Farrell et al., 2002a,b).

Conclusion

While most children across the two communities reported enjoyment of learning and social experience at school, the social phenomena of peer bullying and the non/acceptance of difference pose enduring concerns for educators. A persistent challenge, therefore, is for educators to promote the social dimensions of communities, within and beyond schools that stand to enhance social capital and, in turn, contribute to the wellbeing of children and their communities.

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