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The importance of social capital and trust for inclusion in school and society

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Introduction

In September 2016 UN human rights experts declared in authoritative new guidelines on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that 'Inclusive education is central to achieving high quality education for all learners, including those with disabilities, and for the development of inclusive, peaceful and fair societies.' This places further responsibilities on governments to ensure that inclusive education is in place to combat discrimination, and to promote diversity and participation. The role of schools, in this regard, is to prepare children and youth for a life together with others where connection, respect and solidarity are key concepts. In spite of these recommendations, progress towards inclusive education remains minimal and efforts continue to be directed to making students '... less intrusive rather than to make schools more inclusive' (Artiles and Kozleski, 2016, p. 7) and maintain a lack of regard for racialised, classed and gendered pasts and presents (O'Donnell, 2017) that students bring to school. Consequently there has been a significant growth in both formal and informal exclusion from mainstream classrooms (Hjörne, 2016; Isaksson and Lindquvist, 2015; Riddell et al, 2017).

Governments continue to express rhetorical commitments to inclusive education whilst simultaneously facilitating an 'expanded and expensive SEN industry' (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 56). The rise of the SEN industry, seen in the context of the global expansion of education generally, represents part of the paranoid response (Tomlinson, 2012) of governments to the international country comparisons of student achievement (PISA). It is a pragmatic approach to the management of those young people who have been included through the expansion of education but whose achievements may be insufficient for them to join the economic workforce and are therefore part of the 'spectre of uselessness' (Sennett, 2006, p. 86).

Governments' systems of testing young people's skills, necessarily comparable and serving as markers of that society's status (Svalastoga, 1959; Ydesen, 2014) also help to affirm specific market values of students and schools (Ball, 2007; Dovemark and Arreman, 2017) and increase social differentiation of schools (Johanssson, 2017). In so doing they actively disincentivise schools from acting in the interests of less attractive, resource intensive students.

In this paper, we consider the outcomes for a group of students who, during their lower secondary school years, attended a school that provided a strong inclusive learning environment as the vehicle for all students to succeed. Both the students and the school, in a municipality of Sweden, succeeded in going from bottom of the league tables to top in three years. The students were followed over a period of seven years, during their time at the lower secondary school and onto 33 different high schools. Social capital was used as both a method for accessing students' sense of connectedness and as a framework for analysing these relations. The findings have generated questions about the nature and purpose of education and about the centrality of trust and we explore these in this article. We argue for greater recognition for the role of schools in incubating and cultivating trust in order to mitigate the increasing risks to pupils of marginalisation, failure and undesirable or dangerous associations.

The context of the study

The students interviewed in this study (20 from a cohort of 148) had attended a lower secondary school that worked actively with an approach characterized by inclusive education. The students had moved on to some 33 different high schools around the country and were

interviewed in their sixth and final year of high school, aged 18-19. Half of the students were female and half were male; half had chosen a vocational programme in high school and half had opted for an academic programme.

The inclusive education approach within the school was introduced whilst the students were in lower secondary school. Following the publication of test results which placed the school at the bottom of the national league tables, a major school improvement activity was undertaken to raise student achievement through inclusive education (Allan and Persson, 2016). Students taught previously in special classes were relocated to the mainstream classroom, with in-class support. Inclusion was the norm and guiding principle, and students' individual differences were explicitly used as a resource (for example, use was made of the high mathematical competence of a student with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder diagnosis). The headteacher and staff consistently and emphatically communicated their intent that all pupils would succeed. The teachers were supported with a programme of reading and seminars about inclusive education which encouraged them to consider inclusive pedagogies. The percentage of pupils leaving compulsory school having passed grades in all school subjects rose from 62% to 96% in three years and the school went to top place in the national league table. The students in this study left elementary school with very good results in terms of grades and results on national tests. The results were not sustained through high school. There are potentially many reasons for this and space does not permit us to consider these in detail here. It is clear, however, that networks established by pupils during primary school were broken as they spread across a relatively large number of different high schools and we report, in this article, the students' perspectives on both elementary and high school contexts.

We undertook interviews as the principal qualitative data collection method in order to try to understand the experiences of the students from their own perspective (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014). As we describe later in the paper, we made use of the concept of social capital both as a topic to guide the interview towards relationships and as a tool to facilitate the conversation in this direction. We also used social capital to interpret the interview data. We were asking the students to talk about events from several years ago, requiring from them both recall and reflection which will no doubt have been challenging. However the analysis of the interview material suggested considerable ability in verbalizing their experiences at secondary school, in describing phenomena at a high level of abstraction and in relating these to school everyday life. All interviews were individual and varied in length between 40 and 90 minutes. In all cases, the students themselves chose where the interview should be conducted. Most chose a classroom or booked a conference room in their own upper secondary school; a school café or a cafe outside the school area was used in some cases. All informants were happy for the interviews to be recorded and pseudonyms were used in both the transcripts and in subsequent writing.

Social capital: connecting, including, belonging

The concept of social capital is based on the premise that social relationships make a difference (Field, 2017). They enable individuals to get on and get ahead through the connections they have with other people and the reciprocity, values and trust generated between them. Developed by three key proponents, Robert Putnam (1993); Pierre Bourdieu (1977); and James Coleman (1994), each with their unique take on social capital and the acknowledged limitations of these (Field, 2017), social capital is, thus, a resource, the value of which is directly related to the types of capital that are generated. Woolcock (2001)

distinguishes three types of social capital. *Bonding social capital* involves connections between homogeneous groups such as a family, teachers or students from similar backgrounds. Whilst bonding social capital is considered to be a worthwhile type of capital, bringing values of solidarity and belonging, the limiting nature of its homogeneity has been acknowledged as has the gender blindness of social capital more generally (Allan and Catts, 2014; Norris and Inglehart, 2003). *Bridging social capital,* with looser connections between individuals with diverse characteristics, such as different ethnic groups, is potentially stronger and more beneficial to its members. Woolcott identifies the most propitious form of social capital as *linking social capital,* because of its role in connecting individuals with differential amounts of power, for example teachers and students, and those who are outside a community, thereby allowing for a leverage of resources.

A key element of social capital is trust, which, for Fukuyama (1995; 2001) is the extent to which people believe that others act responsibly and for the public good. Trust has also been described by Uslaner (2002: 1) as an expectation that one will receive - and give - fair treatment, a kind of 'chicken soup of social life'. By this he means that social capital brings good things that are reciprocated, but, like chicken soup, it works in mysterious ways: we tend only to trust those we know, yet the greatest benefits come from trusting strangers. Fukuyama argues that the level of trust within a society can affect its economic growth and stability and can determine the types of organisations that are able to flourish. Thus, societies high in trust (and Fukuyama cites Japan and Germany as examples) are more likely to establish civic and voluntary organisations, whereas where there are low levels of trust (such as in France, Korea, China and southern Italy), large corporate organisations will thrive, as will familial organisations which may further erode trust. Fukuyama (1995: 5) argues that strong organisations and structures cannot be legislated into existence but have to be 'nourished

through an increased awareness and respect for culture' and for cultural difference. Paradoxically that very cultural difference can be seen as potentially undermining trust, at least according to Putnam (2007). He argues that diversity produces fear and leads people to disconnect from one another, citing evidence that in areas of high levels of ethnic diversity, people desist from associating with others and 'hunker down—that is, to pull in like a turtle.' This uneasiness about diversity that Putnam notes as prevalent in parts of American society surfaces within educational policy and practice globally in the form of 'naysayers [who] point out that inclusion does not work' (Connor 2012: 118). Putnam's solution to the 'problem' of diversity is to help citizens to become 'more comfortable with diversity' (2007: 159) by reducing its 'social salience without eliminating personal importance' (2007: 161). A potentially more valuable approach could be to enhance the social salience of diversity. This could thereby help to cultivate, rather than dissipate, trust within communities. Uslaner (2002: 2) proposes coming from the opposite end and seeking to build trust, since:

> When we perceive a shared fate with others, we reach out to them in other ways. We feel bad when those we trust have difficulties not of their own making. So people who trust others will seek to better the lives of those who have less, either by favouring government programs to redress grievances or, even more critically, by giving of their own time and money.

Social capital has increasingly been taken up as a policy tool, for example by the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Field, 2017; Schuller, 2007; Bebbington et al, 2014), to supplement human capital. Its value in promoting social cohesion among minority groups and a more effective engagement with diversity has also proved attractive to policymakers (Dhesi, 2000; Lauglo; 2000; Blomkvist, 2001; Uslaner,

2010). Consequently, concludes Halpern (2005: 285), 'the case for active intervention in social capital is very strong', although a contrary argument is given by Fukuyama (2001) who warns that state intervention in civic networks, taken too far, can seriously damage individuals' social capital. We were particularly interested in whether the efforts in the Swedish school to promote an inclusive ethos could be read as a type of social capital intervention and, if so, whether the students gained advantages through their acquisition of this resource.

Social capital as a topic and a tool

The framework of social capital was used to structure the interviews with the students, with an explicit focus on relationships in the school. At the end of the interviews, students were invited to map out visually those people and opportunities (other things, including the space of the school itself) they felt had been important to them during their time at school. This differed from sociometric approaches as there was no attempt to quantify the associations between students; rather, the map was produced with the intention of stimulating the students' reflections on the nature of their associations and their influence on their school experience. The analysis of the interviews sought to examine the extent to which the different kinds of associations or connections referred to by the students reflected the different types - bonding, bridging and linking - social capital. We also paid attention to the values and norms that the students described as important to them and considered the extent to which these were more or less *useful* to them. And given the school's orientation to inclusion, we focused on both the students' descriptions of inclusion as a concept and as a guiding principle in the various educational activities they participated in. A thematic analysis, involving scrutiny of the transcripts and the identification of patterns was undertaken independently by the two authors then examined jointly. The following categories were identified: *Accountability,*

Participation, Future, Fellowship, Upper secondary school, Lifelong learning, Deviation, Normality, Environment (External) Understanding, Belonging, Security and *Mutual exchange*. A further analysis of these categories, using the concepts of social capital generated three major thematic strands: *future-proofing success; diversity benefits* and *high school survival*. Two elements of values and norms emerged as having central importance within the data - trust and confidence - and these were subjected to further analysis in the context of their worth - actual or potential - for the individuals and for the particular society in which this study was located.

Findings: social capital for all

The findings revealed a particularly active and enabling kind of social capital among the students. This gave them an outlook about themselves and their future that was highly positive and saw them derive benefits from engaging with diversity, and with individuals with diverse characteristics and experiences. The students seemed less aware of the current worth of their social capital to themselves, representing this as a given, but placed a strong value on the benefits to others, particularly students from diverse backgrounds, and sought to invest in the relationships with teachers and students. Taking their acquired social capital into high school was, however, challenging and students reported resistance to their social capital when they tried to put it to use. Nevertheless, key outcomes, in the form of trust and confidence, appeared to have potential, portability and durability.

Future-proofing success

Transition to high school and beyond was, for many of the students, 'obvious', as was their likely success. Even where, in one case, a student had planned a gap year before starting university and in another, where the student declared himself 'tired of school', they were clear

that they would return to study. Much of the certainty about future academic success had come through discussions with the teachers, who had, according to one student, always responded to questions about choices and had never been negative. It had also come from the continued assurance from the teachers that such certainty was not misplaced – and that all would succeed. The constant success messaging by the teachers, with teachers who 'went on about the score' and which was, for one student 'almost as if they had forced us', had apparently penetrated to the point that the students had come to not know an alternative. One student spoke of the overwhelming assumption operating among the teachers – 'that was the whole point' – that they would be approved in all subjects and go to high school.

The students, in spite of their their lightness towards the headteacher and his behaviour in morning assemblies, recognised the key role he played in convincing them that they would succeed and, helped by his continuous repetition of the message, they came to believe this and to believe in themselves:

> I thought it was pretty funny to mock his motto … but with a twinkle in the eye. I thought he was extremely good when he opened the large assemblies with his speech that everyone would be winners and together it will be easier. It was very useful, I think, to have those words ringing in my head.

Students considered the relationships with the teachers to be instrumental in their success. One student described how the relationship with his teacher had motivated him to achieve: 'Our class teacher. His mentality suits me quite well. We got along very well. It sort of spurred me on to do well when you feel good about the teacher.' The motivational effects of the teachers were noted by another student who said The teachers were really like this: 'get to

work; to work; fight!' One student described her teacher as 'not only a teacher but she was a friend too. She could talk to you if there was anything and was a bit like a psychologist, but not. She cared. And then if you were not so good in anything she could help you and explain.' This student's connection with an individual teacher appeared to be not only strong, but to also to extend beyond the pedagogical to the point that the teacher seemed to know the student's mind. Another student made a similar observation: 'He was a nice guy who understood us as students and who understood what we were thinking'

Students reported their considerations of their further and higher education and career options, deploying spatial and travel metaphors and reflecting aspirations to 'look a little further away' or to find more doors opened (for example through language learning). The students seemed to view themselves as lifelong learners and saw their lower secondary school experience as key to orienting themselves in this way. One student, for example, talked of the secondary school as a reason for success in later working life by providing the necessary foundational knowledge and skills. Another student reflected on being helped to understand 'why you should have grades and what chances it gives in life as well,' while a third remembered appreciatively the rounded conversations with teachers about not just getting into a particular programme but also developing as a person. The students' ability to narrate themselves as capable and confident learners appeared to be a product of the social capital developed through the relationships with the teachers and looked set to enable them to, as Putnam (2000) suggests, both get on and get ahead. This does not imply success in an individualistic sense, by doing better than one's peers, but rather by succeeding through the pursuit of shared objectives (Putnam, 1996).

Diversity benefits

Students indicated that they considered the diversity within the school, especially in relation to ability, to be a substantial and valuable resource that appeared to go beyond any rhetorical and clichéd celebration of difference of the kind that offends disabled people (Mitchell, 2015) because it amounts to mere tolerance (Slee, 2003). They identified the benefits to individual students, particularly those with identified special needs, of being taught together with them, but also highlighted personal gains from interacting with people who were different from them.

The benefits to the students with special needs of learning within a mainstream classroom were obvious in a way that the students we interviewed felt did not need to be spelled out. But, in so doing, at the request of the interviewer, they underlined the personal advantages to the students from both being part of a community and from the additional help that was on offer within the classroom. One student commented: 'They got the help, they were more focused, were silent and could work well.' Another student described the intensive help received in class by a female student with special needs but suggested that this contributed to her isolation, because none of the girls interacted with her. However, this student went on to portray a context in which the dominance of the boys - and the teachers' tendency to react to them - had led to the majority of girls feeling that they did not participate fully within the classroom. The student concluded: 'I hope and believe that she got the help she needed'. In spite of some of the complexities in the relationships within the classroom, and the potential exclusion even for the disclosing student herself, she seemed to consider the student with special needs to be benefiting – on balance – from the additional support and from being able to receive this within the classroom.

The principal advantages of learning alongside students with special needs were practical,

with two teachers, rather than the usual one, making more help available to everyone. For one student, this was especially important in enabling another student's disruptive behaviour to be picked up and dealt with effectively. It also made for a 'good atmosphere', according to yet another student, although some commented that with one or other of the teachers often talking, the classroom sometimes felt noisy and it was difficult to concentrate. Students also felt they benefited from a greater awareness of some of the additional needs students brought to the classroom. One student, for example, commented that he had 'got an insight that it is difficult for some and some need extra help and that you know how to handle situations in the future' as a result of this exposure to difference. This recognition by young people of the pedagogic value of inclusion has been noted (Allan, 1999; Allan et al, 2009), while Goodley (2012, 2014) goes further to promote disabled students s 'guerrillas encroaching upon education (2014: 104). This creates humbling effects for students and educators alike (Michalko, 2012).

The presence of students with special needs was occasionally described by mainstream students as creating a 'messiness', but not one that was problematic and it was usually managed well by the teachers. One student, learning alongside a student who occasionally threw text books out of the window, observed that the teachers 'took good hold of it. So there was no problem with it.' Another student, describing an individual diagnosed with ADHD who was 'messy' in class, causing disruption by sitting in everyone's seats and chatting, and who received regular massages to calm him down, found himself a little bothered, 'but not so that I could not handle my studies'. This student also described as his 'best friend', a student with the label of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

High school survival

The social capital acquired by the students had given them a sense of themselves as successful learners and a positive regard for the benefits of association with students from diverse backgrounds. Each of these would seem, on the face of it, to be both portable and durable attributes. The students' social capital appeared, however, to be difficult to carry over and sustain within high school. We have already indicated that the students did not achieve the same level of results in high school. The students reflected on the considerable differences between the 'cosy' context of their lower secondary school and the more robust atmosphere of high school. Teachers at high school were less involved with them than they were in the lower secondary school. Students reported themselves struggling at high school with the less intensive help and with a sense that there was a lower expectation that they would seek help. There was not, at high school, the ease with which they could ask questions that they had experienced in the lower secondary school, together with the affirmation that 'yes, you will understand'. One student said of her classmates: 'they don't dare to ask for help'. Students reported the sense of a much greater responsibility upon them as learners, to find out information about classes and programmes, 'keep track' of their learning and to catch up on anything they had missed, which some found difficult because of their earlier socialisation. It was their choice now and if, for example, they wanted to stay up until midnight before going to school no teachers would 'nag' them. Teachers in the high school still 'keep an eye on you but it's not the same'. One student spoke of how he had responded to the greater 'independence' in high school by slacking off: 'I felt that it was more fun to sit and play in the afternoon than sitting and studying'. He recognised this had been entirely his own choice but his decline took him by surprise. He subsequently managed to establish some self-discipline and found some success but observed that he might have benefited from some warning about the dangers of dependency within his earlier learning context. Some students had found

individual teachers within high school who were supportive and who encouraged them to seek help, but the overwhelming sense from the students was that they were much more on their own as learners in high school and their success was not the accepted given and obligation that they had felt from the lower secondary teachers.

One student spoke of seeking a diagnosis of dyslexia only after entering high school. It had not been necessary at lower secondary, she suggested, because 'we got so much extra anyway' and there was never any problem with her not understanding or reading slowly. Her lower secondary teachers had encouraged her to exercise her rights and she had no hesitation in seeking confirmation of her diagnosis and in asking her high school teachers to explain things better. In contrast, another student described how she had already been in possession of an official diagnosis of dyslexia whilst at lower secondary. It had not been necessary to use this as teachers had given all the necessary support and had created a culture of peer support through which she received additional help with reading. In secondary, the diagnosis had taken on greater significance but was used by teachers to signal the risks of her failing. This student suggested that at upper secondary she had experienced bullying for the first time and had acquired the identity as someone who was stupid; this, she indicated was 'not exactly good'.

Trust and confidence

Two key elements of social capital appear to have been associated with the students' success: trust and confidence. Each of these elements were generated through an orientation to inclusion, which for them was participation and a sense of belonging, and which pervaded their daily activities.

Trust, following the Fukuyama (2001) definition cited earlier, is the extent to which people believe others act responsibly and for the public good. It is acquired through habituation to the common norms of a group or community and, as such, can never be individual, but must always be social. Recurring in the students' narratives was not only their strong sense that teachers and senior staff in lower secondary had high demands and high expectations of all of them, but that teachers clearly said and showed in their actions that they believed in students' abilities and willingness to learn. These strong discourses of success by the teachers and their associated actions appeared to generate trust among the students that they would indeed succeed. Teachers, school health staff and school management conveyed to the students their availability to them for any help they might need. They all expressed intent that the students would succeed in school and communicated to the students consistently and frequently that this was their desire. This apparent investment by the teachers in the students' success could be interpreted simply as teacher commitment. It seemed, however, to go beyond this to depict a longing on the part of the teachers for the students to succeed and an invitation to the students to place their trust in them. The particular trust being developed also had a moralistic quality that Uslaner (2010: 3) describes as bringing people who are different together and making them want more for each other:

> If we believe we are connected to people who are different from ourselves and have a moral responsibility for their fate, we see that trust is a fundamentally egalitarian ideal … A culture of trust depends upon the idea that things will get better for those who have less and it is in our power to make the world better.

This moralistic kind of trust differs from the standard accounts of trust which are strategic and based on prior knowledge and experience (Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994). For both

Uslaner and Fukuyama moralistic trust, whilst apparently less rational, has less risk associated with it because it makes the normative assumption that people should – and usually do – behave.

The students' enhanced confidence could be interpreted as a consequence of their increased trust. Having habitually heard the teachers' insistence that they would all succeed, they had come to accept this as a factual truth and confidence, as embodied in the students, involved belief both in their own skills and in their ability to achieve success. When the students described the goals they had achieved, they included curriculum and syllabus goals as well as their own personal goals and in so doing provided a meta-narrative of themselves as learners. The students' confidence appeared both individualistic, pertaining to the student, and sociable, through its dependence on the teachers' verification and validation. Several of the students indicated that the confidence in their own ability had affected their choices for high school as well as their attitude towards studies. The students described their own subject knowledge and study skills as valuable knowledge and as a good foundation for entering high school. Many of the students said they felt that they had a head start on their classmates and that their confidence was strengthened by this.

Conclusion

> The old Big Brother was preoccupied with inclusion – integrating, getting people into line and keeping them there. The new Big Brother's concern is exclusion – spotting the people who 'do not fit' into the place they are in, banishing them from the place and deporting them 'where they belong', or better still never allowing them to come anywhere near in the first place. (Bauman, 2004: 132)

The insistence within the school that everyone, without exception, would succeed perhaps signals a return to a preoccupation with inclusion and this, we argue, is no bad thing. This is especially significant given Slee's (2011: 84) stark reminder that inclusive education 'remains a political project where we seek to identify the complex ways in which barriers prevent students accessing, authentically participating and succeeding in education.' Inclusive education, in this vein becomes, as Slee suggests it should, an apprenticeship in democracy, denying voice to 'ableist discourses in education and biased sociopolitical systems' (ibid). Governments are increasingly required to produce informed and informative blueprints for how their schools will produce a future adult population that can compete in the knowledge economy and to demonstrate how their system is resilient enough to cope with the enhanced societal pressures such as migration and climate. They are expected to assert, through their own educational policies and steering documents and their uptake of international legislation, particular values concerning how education should deliver the kind of society it wants. However, as Andreasson et al (2015) point out, the translation of values into educational practice can create marginalisation and alienation for groups and individuals because of the low levels of trust involved. Governments must demonstrate how education will equip young people with the skills that will enable them to succeed, and thereby contribute to their country's international standing, whilst also preparing them to function effectively in an increasingly fragmented society. This fragmentation reaches into the everyday lives of young people, particularly through digital media that can simultaneously connect and isolate, or can both inform and misinform. Government's obligations are derived within a context of low trust and this is passed on to schools through a series of contractual requirements and systems of monitoring. Uslaner (2002) suggests that good government does not generate trust but trust may make government better and indeed somewhat paradoxically, allowing schools to increase and develop trust may make them easier to govern.

Fukuyama (1995) notes that the inevitable alternative to an absence of trust is the creation of legalistic frameworks that involve transaction costs and this in turn generates further economic costs. For teachers, the consequences of operating in a low trust environment are significant and can be seen to be manifest in the high levels of teacher stress and dissatisfaction that have been reported (NUT, 2011; Parding et al, 2017). There are even greater risks to students from being in schools that are devoid of trust. There is the risk of marginalization and failure of individual students (Lalvani and Broderick, 2015) and their disconnection from a school community that has no investment in them or in their success. There is a particular risk that students with diagnoses of special needs miss out on their teachers' and their peers' belief in their capacity to succeed and their contribution to that success. Finally, there is also the risk of individuals seeking association outside of school - with potentially undesirable or dangerous elements - if they are unable to find meaningful connections within the school community. Inclusive education has a more important role than ever before in mitigating these risks through the cultivation of trust and confidence.

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