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National College
for Leadership of Schools
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Schools and academies

Research Associate Full report

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Resource

**Schools, communities and social capital:
building blocks in the 'Big Society'**

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Abstract

This study looked at how effective schools engage with their communities. Its aim was to identify key mechanisms that promoted community engagement. It also sought to determine the impact this had on the amount and nature of social capital available to pupils, parents and the wider community. Effective schools were found to generate significant amounts of social capital within their institutions as demonstrated by the degree of trust, reciprocity, civic engagement and social cohesion. Pupil voice was a powerful mechanism in developing a sense of control and self-efficacy. Recently created posts such as family workers, therapists and social work placements extended much of this impact into the family.

Schools that went further to promote social capital in the neighbourhood were those with a more aspirational vision that went beyond simply engaging the community to aid school improvement. They viewed community empowerment as key to the success of their pupils and families within the wider social context. They encouraged community leadership and decision-making, often through informal learning approaches, and truly became 'hubs of the community', facilitating community development and promoting community cohesion. The findings suggest that a more reciprocal view is needed of the relationship between school and community and that schools could play a central role in creating the 'Big Society'.

Introduction

Linking school improvement to community development can have an important effect on learning, as well as changing community and structural factors that promote educational inequality (Warren 2005). Crucial to this relationship is the school's capacity to promote community cohesion and build social capital (Green et al. 2003; Stevens et al. 2007). Community cohesion is an outcome of effective community engagement and empowerment. A healthy society is therefore dependent on the nature and quality of relationships that exist within and between communities. The term 'social capital' has been used to describe the impact of such relationships. It can be loosely defined as 'the social glue that helps people, organisations and communities work together towards shared goals' (North East Social Capital Forum 2006: 3). The amount and nature of social capital has also been linked to a range of children's outcomes, including health and education (Martin 2005).

It has been suggested that only a limited proportion of a child's success in life are attributable to school activities (Hirsch 2007). The majority of factors are linked to social contexts and family arrangements (West-Burnham et al. 2007). Mechanisms to promote community engagement and empowerment that reach beyond the traditional school model are therefore needed in order to address the educational inequality that is prevalent in our society today. The term 'public value' has been used to describe this shift in the concept of how schools engage with their communities not only to provide services but also to create social outcomes that are valued by the community (Leadbeater & Mongon 2008). The public value of schools is related to the degree that they actively engage with their communities and reach out to social networks outside of the school. These are also key processes that will generate social capital.

This research recognises that schools are one of the few public institutions with both the capacity and the opportunity to generate social capital within the communities that they serve. Through analysis of Ofsted reports and by structured interviews with schools, organisations and people at the forefront of social capital development, several lines of enquiry were addressed:

- What effective strategies can schools employ to promote social capital within families and the wider community?
- How can we determine the main barriers that prevent this happening?
- What are the future implications for leaders and policy-makers if schools are to take their place as true 'hubs of the community'?

It is hoped that the findings will inform the National College, policy-makers and education professionals about the key role of schools in the 'Big Society', where public services are reformed, communities are empowered and citizens encouraged into civil action (Cabinet Office 2010).

Literature review

The relationship between poverty and educational achievement has been well documented and is frequently associated with disempowerment and lack of confidence (Hirsch 2007; Kendall et al. 2008). Social disadvantage is caused by a wider range of factors, many being outside of the school's control (West-Burnham et al. 2007), and recent attempts to address these inequalities through school-led initiatives (for example, Excellence in Cities) have demonstrated only limited impact (Raffo et al. 2007). Kendall et al. (2008) also cite a lack of evidence to support the sustainability of any impact.

Crowther et al. (2003) describe several models for the way in which schools promote outcomes for children and young people. These range from a narrow focus on institutional activities to raise individual attainment, to an approach that views the wellbeing of families and communities as inextricably linked to the development of the child. However, even with the latter model, the authors found that few of the efforts made by schools resulted in fundamental changes in the lives of the communities they served. It has long been suggested that an over-reliance on professional services may disable the capacity of communities to find solutions from within (Illich et al. 1977; Block 2008). A more critical conversation may now be needed about the dynamics of communities and the purpose of schools to transform them by capacity-building (Craig & O'Leary 2006).

Social capital is a key characteristic of all communities and has been variously defined as: a product of durable networks of individuals (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977); resources available to strong family or community social organisations (Coleman 1988); and more recently as a crucial characteristic of healthy civic society (Putnam 2000). West-Burnham et al. (2007) summarised the characteristics of communities with high social capital (see Table 1 at the end of this section), and its presence has been linked to desirable outcomes for children and young people in terms of health and educational success (Martin 2005). Stevens et al. (2007) described a range of positive wider benefits attributable to social capital in secondary school pupils. Meanwhile, a recent OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) report suggests that education has the potential to improve health and social capital but it is the context within which that capital functions that is important, for example, family and community (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation 2010). Attempts have also been made to define indicators of social capital for children (Catts & Ozga 2005; Arshad & McLennan 2008) and how it benefits specific marginalised groups such as refugees (Smyth et al. 2008) and young carers (Barry 2008).

Putnam (2000) defines different forms of social capital dependent on its function. Bonding social capital is crucial to relationships within a particular group and helps people to 'get by' in life. Bridging social capital secures the relationships between groups with different interests and views. It helps people to 'get ahead' in life. Linking social capital connects people who have differing levels of power (for example, social class) to help them 'get around' in life. However, it is clear that not all outcomes of social capital are desirable, and what makes a healthy community is not just the quantity of social capital (Carroll 2001). The distribution of different forms of social capital is related to the degree of cohesion within a locality (Putnam 2000; Woolcock 2001). High bonding social capital can lead to social exclusion of outsiders, resulting in exclusivity and tension between different community groups (Portes 1998). In addition, the presence of social capital does not always mean that it is equally accessible to all members of the community (Horvat 2003).

The ability of social capital to transform communities is at the heart of the 'Big Society' vision which is described as seeking to empower citizens and increase their capacity to take up such power while encouraging a sense of collective efficacy (Wei 2010). Schools are centrally placed to promote aspects of social capital such as reciprocity, civic engagement, trust and collaborative action (Melaville 1999; Trevino & Trevino 2004; Taylor 2007). This is no surprise as healthy schools, like healthy communities, create purposeful and constructive relationships, and it is through relationships that we build social capital (Field 2003; West-Burnham et al. 2007). Several mechanisms by which this might occur have been suggested, and these include:

- developing a core curriculum based on relational learning (Otero 2001)
- developing bridging strategies by becoming places of dialogue for the whole community (Lindley 2006)
- building relational capacity within the family to model supportive and positive relationships and provide social spaces for families to come together
- building the capacity of community organisations, thus recognising the potential of communities to overcome problems when they are empowered and resourced to do so (Block 2008)
- providing resources and premises to support the work of local community groups

Mediratta et al. (2008) have suggested a direct link between school improvement and community organising. They demonstrated a range of positive outcomes for both school (for example, improved learning environments and academic outcomes) and community (for example, increased parental and student civic engagement and staff morale). The key appeared to be an approach to community capacity-building that promoted equity and developed a sense of advocacy. Leadbeater and Mongon (2008) suggest that schools will need to empower people and resources outside the traditional institute and determine ways to increase the degree to which the school is seen to have public value. In other words, they may need to invest resources in creating social capital outside of the school. This will require a better understanding of how school strategies contribute to the creation of social capital and how its relationship with the wider community serves to promote school improvement (West-Burnham 2003). It also supports the suggested role schools may play in the 'Big Society' by encouraging community co-ordination where social capital is low (Big Society Public Services Seminars 2010a).

Table 1: Widely accepted characteristics of communities with high social capital

Characteristic	Definition
Shared social norms and values	A clear consensus about the moral basis of community where principles are known, shared, understood and acted on
Sophisticated social networks	Clear and rich lines of communication with shared language, a common vocabulary and high quality dialogue
High levels of trust	Openness, consistency and reliability
High civic engagement	People are good citizens; they vote, stand for election and participate in the civic community
Symbols and rituals	A sense of identity which is celebrated through shared ceremonies and events
Interdependence and reciprocity	A high level of caring and sharing; people 'look out for each other'
Volunteering and community action	People join in clubs, societies and charities that feature prominently in community action

Source: Adapted from West Burnham et al. (2007: 32)

Methodology

Orientation interviews

Three interviews were carried out with people currently exploring the relationship between school reform, educational disadvantage and social capital development. The interviewees included an educational researcher, a leader in neighbourhood renewal and a social entrepreneur, and interviews were structured following the guidance of Cohen et al. (2007). The evidence collected provided a broad overview of current and future thinking around the relationship between schools and communities, and informed the key lines of inquiry.

Literature review

A wide range of empirical research, reports, books chapters and web-based writing was included in the literature search. The purpose was to analyse current evidence and opinion in response to the following questions:

- Do current models of schooling have a sustainable impact on communities?
- What is the evidence that social capital is linked to outcomes for children and young people?
- What is the evidence that schools can generate/release social capital in local communities?

Ofsted report analysis

Twenty Ofsted reports of primary schools from a variety of social contexts in the same local authority were analysed sequentially, using inductive coding (Miles & Huberman 1994). Evidence is presented about key mechanisms by which effective schools engage communities and how this might create or release different forms of social capital. All of the schools were judged 'good' or 'outstanding' for overall effectiveness by Ofsted in 2009, and many were reported to be 'outstanding' in their duty to promote community cohesion. Two frames of reference for social capital were applied separately to the reports. These related to particular themes of social capital (Ruston & Akinrodoye 2002), and the social context where that capital was demonstrated to have its impact (AERS 2006).

Focused school interviews

Two schools from the above sample of Ofsted reports were selected for more detailed investigation. Structured interviews were carried out with a cross-section of stakeholders including the headteacher as well as a range of staff, parents, pupils and community members. Evidence was collated using an evaluative matrix of both the themes and contexts of social capital referred to above. This evidence was used to determine some of the key characteristics of school ethos and leadership that led the schools to be so proactive within their community contexts and the quality of resulting relationships both within the school and with the wider community. In addition several key strategies were identified for each school that had a significant impact on the nature and degree of social capital within the local community.

Specific initiative case studies

Four distinct initiatives were also analysed for their impact on social capital. All of these initiatives were the result of a school-community partnership and demonstrate how schools might better identify and enhance already existing community resources to take a more preventative approach to school improvement.

Findings

Analysis of Ofsted reports

Ofsted reports can be a rich and easily available resource of evidence about effective school strategies and the impact they have on various stakeholders. However, they are written in response to a specific inspection framework and may therefore be limited in relation to community-level impact. In order to produce a more comprehensive assessment, reports were analysed using two different social capital criteria. A more detailed understanding was then gained through the focus group interviews in selected schools.

Themes of social capital evident in Ofsted reports

Identifying the presence of social capital may depend on the definitions used. In this report, five themes (see Appendix A) were used to identify the presence of social capital.

Trust, reciprocity and social cohesion

The defining characteristic of these schools was the welcoming, caring and inclusive ethos. They were described as 'happy places' by parents and pupils alike. High quality relationships, mutual respect, loyalty and a sense of belonging were common characteristics. Community cohesion was stated to be central to what many schools did to develop a strong cultural awareness and a wide understanding of difference that was celebrated as positive and enriching. Pupils were encouraged to look after each other and to find better ways to manage conflict. One pupil told inspectors "you don't have to fight back, you can talk!". Parents trusted and valued the staff to care for their children and occasionally chose to travel significant distances to the school rather than move to a more local institution.

Participation, social engagement and commitment

Pupils were actively encouraged to contribute to the school community, either individually or collectively, through a wide range of positions of responsibility, for example, peer mentors and school council representatives. These responsibilities were valued and enjoyed by the children and gave them a strong sense of pride in their school community and its achievements. Pupil voice was strong and pupils recognised that what they said was listened to and often acted on. A clear commitment to equality of opportunity and an inclusive ethos was evident. This promoted the sense that everyone had value and differences were seen as assets.

Parents were seen as key learning providers and staff were proactive in engaging and supporting them, especially those who were vulnerable or hard to reach. Parents were found to refer to their school as "one big family" or "supporting the whole family". In some cases schools were described as reaching out beyond expected boundaries, and provided training or employment opportunities for local adults. Many schools were active in removing barriers to engagement both within the school and beyond. Pupils were often encouraged to support and participate in the life of the local community or become actively involved in international partnerships that promoted a sense of connectedness. A commitment to charitable fundraising also developed this sense of shared responsibility for other communities, both at home and around the world.

Control and self-efficacy

Many schools modelled an asset-building approach to raise aspirations and self-esteem. Children and adults were found to develop a sense of advocacy and an ambition to improve their school and communities. Positions of responsibility were often accompanied by training, and pupils demonstrated confidence, enthusiasm and a mature attitude towards civic responsibility.

The same focus on empowerment and partnership was promoted throughout the wider school community and through extensive pastoral support for the whole family. Skilled staff (for example, family workers) created strong links through high quality relationships and engaged a wide range of other partners and agencies to provide support and opportunities for family members. Emotional wellbeing was actively promoted and parents were found to comment on the strong community dimensions of the school and how it demonstrated the way “a community can work together for the benefit of all”.

Social interaction, social networks and social support

Schools were often described as being at the “heart of the community” and having a concern for the whole child. Pupils and parents alike demonstrated a sense of belonging to a community that cared for and supported each other, describing it as “one big family”. In addition, peer support mechanisms encouraged parents and pupils to recognise that their personal wellbeing was dependent on their relationships with others. A wide range of purposeful partnerships promoted collaboration within the wider community and these were recognised by schools as important resources to support families, promote pupil wellbeing and reach vulnerable groups. They also promoted community awareness, developed workplace skills and improved extra-curricular provision.

Perception of community-level structures or characteristics

A clear and consistent vision of the school being at the heart of the community was an important feature in determining the ethos of many of these schools. The curriculum was often clearly structured around the community, with visits and visitors being viewed as key contexts for learning. This resulted in strong neighbourhood awareness and a sense of belonging. The focus of many schools on the local environment and global citizenship engaged some pupils in learning about the structures that promote healthy communities and what happens when these break down. However, there was insufficient evidence to suggest that schools had a clear and comprehensive understanding of the community context and its place within that community.

Contexts of social capital impact evident in Ofsted reports

A second set of criteria and associated indicators were used to describe the impact that school-generated social capital might have in various relational contexts (see Appendix B).

Family social capital

Effective schools attempted to model healthy families through being welcoming, caring and inclusive places. Communication with parents was prioritised and promoted to ensure engagement and support for both pupils and their families. As a result, school staff were often trusted and respected while parents felt confident that they were valued and cared for. One school was reported to reach beyond expected boundaries to engage and support vulnerable families. Families were also encouraged to value reciprocity and the importance of mutual support, for example, mother and toddler groups and parenting programmes. Skills within the family were nurtured when parents were encouraged to be actively involved in children’s learning. Utilising parents’ skills in the classroom was a particularly powerful way to empower parents. This created positive learning role models in the home, improved parent-child relationships and established the role of the parent as the primary learning provider.

Institutional social capital

Schools also attempted to model healthy communities through equality, friendship, co-operation and a celebration of differences. Relationships between pupils and adults were caring and supportive. One pupil stated “we love the way adults respect us!”. The significant trust placed in the school by parents was demonstrated in the comment that their school was a “family where everyone knows and helps each other”. Care, guidance and support were often praised, and parents praised the concern and dedication of the other staff. Many activities sought to build personal and collective efficacy and innovative mechanisms were employed to build self-esteem and confidence of pupils and adults alike.

A strong emphasis was placed on learning to co-operate, valuing the individual and having an awareness of the needs of others. This was crucial in creating a sense of pride, loyalty and belonging. Pupils were encouraged to take decision-making roles and responsibility for the welfare of others. They looked after younger peers, taking seriously their responsibility for helping to make the school safe, and actively challenging bullying and racism. As a result pupils felt safe and happy, could identify where to go if they had a problem and were encouraged to manage conflict through dialogue. This resulted in a strong sense of mutual respect and co-operation throughout the schools.

A team ethos was evident among staff and in some schools a corporate approach was taken to school improvement. There was a strong sense of community spirit where newly qualified teachers (NQTs) spoke with enthusiasm about the support they received.

Neighbourhood social capital

Neighbourhood awareness was promoted in many schools through innovative curricula based on a strong awareness of the school’s role in the community. This was reinforced by community performances, a wide range of visits to local places and visitors from the local community. Pupils valued these links with the neighbourhood and were often aware of its cultural diversity. They also supported local and global good causes to understand the needs of the wider community. In some cases governors and school leaders were active in addressing some of the barriers experienced by the neighbourhood. Extended provision was comprehensive particularly through adult education, employing local people and supporting those facing challenging circumstances.

Community organisation social capital

Schools recognised it as part of their mandate to raise local awareness and the capacity of individuals to contribute to their locality. This was achieved through activities that brought pupils and adults together for a common purpose, often supporting local environmental work and links developing with local faith groups and other community organisations. However, wider use of the school facilities and resources by community groups was not as evident. Space to hold community gatherings is a key resource that allows communities to become self-organising and empowered to provide opportunities for themselves.

Infrastructure

Schools were proactive in engaging other agencies, ensuring that pupils and parents accessed appropriate services in the support of their health and wellbeing. This was prioritised in the appointment of pastoral staff dedicated to improving parent access to support. The curriculum in many schools developed a programme of opportunities and visits to help pupils understand about the workplace, and involvement in environmental projects promoted individual responsibility for community safety and wellbeing.

Focus interviews: School A

Context

This school is located in a racially diverse city centre neighbourhood, and the ward it serves experiences substantial deprivation with unemployment at almost twice the national average, with over a quarter of the children coming from lone-parent families. Crime and gang culture has been a significant concern and there have also been recent racial tensions between different ethnic groups within the community. In general, however, members of the community value the racial diversity within their locality and believe that if people got to know each other then they would be more accepting. They describe, with a sense of pride, the community spirit that is friendly and welcoming, resenting the attitude of others to their locality. Although there is still a significant gang issue in the area, they describe the neighbourhood as a safe place to live, and that it's just knowing who's who and not to get involved.

Ethos and leadership

The headteacher took over leadership of the school just weeks before Ofsted judged the school to require Special Measures. He began with a clear focus on raising attainment at Key Stages 1 and 2 but soon recognised that,

“just acting on a very narrow academic front was not going to make the difference”.

At the same time the school became part of a collaborative improvement network that resulted in a more holistic approach to raising standards, taking responsibility for areas that historically were not recognised as the school's responsibility.

In 2009 the school was judged to be 'outstanding', with standards meeting national expectations in most cases. The head recognises this not as the result of a grand strategic plan but more of a 'journey of discovery' achieved by broadening the school's repertoire and taking opportunities as they arose. For example, when the school network was offered training for family workers, several staff from this school were trained.

The initial change was not without resistance. Several staff understood the change that was needed but a number did not share the vision and felt little allegiance to the local community. The head explained that the change was “not just about direct impact, it is about changing the culture”. He recognised that directive leadership was needed to make the initial change, but distributive leadership would be required to sustain the shift in culture. This culture change came when the school started to employ support staff from within the local community and the staff room discussions became less about the community deficits and more about the school's aspirations for its children. The shift in culture described by the head was “about building resilience through relationships and making people confident!”.

Relationship between the school and community

Parents placed great faith in this school because of the quality of those relationships. They stated that staff were approachable, caring and engaging, recognising when there was a problem and making themselves available (especially if the parents found the problem difficult to talk about). They described an ethos of mutual respect where people were valued. As a result, parents were used to expressing their opinions and approaching the school for help.

Long-serving staff recognised the journey from an academic to a pastoral focus that the school had taken. They described the conscious effort that was made to make parents welcome and to find out about their needs and opinions. They felt privileged to be part of a school where staff made time to spend with parents. They also recognised that the journey was not an overnight transition and was dependent on developing mutual trust and respect with parents. The head recognised that parents' expectations for their children were realistic and actually aligned closely with the school's. “They want children to achieve as high as possible, to behave well in school and to take that behaviour out with them into the community.”

Important in the school's role was the identification and empowerment of local skills. They were proactive in bringing communities together and in making their premises available to community partners both during the school day as well as during evenings and weekends. The head's philosophy for community engagement was:

“to be clear about the school's central role in the community and then to be prepared to grab every opportunity as it arises”.

Key mechanisms to promote social capital

Family support

The school began to run induction workshops for new families to engage them and build trust. These were run by the family worker and then followed up three and six weeks later to monitor continued engagement. This soon became an informal network of parents who felt happy to share more deeply, discussing concerns relating to issues outside school, for example, housing. Eventually the family worker started to identify and train parent mentors, thus promoting self-efficacy and developing future community leaders.

Access to premises

The school employs local support staff who are willing to open up the building during weekends. This has enabled them to offer various community groups access to the premises out of school hours. A lunchtime football coach voiced an interest in setting up a coaching school at weekends – the school provided access to the field in return for a reduced rate for their pupils. An Arabic Supplementary School has been running on the premises at weekends, and a local Gambian community celebrated their independence day at the school. This has promoted informal community networks, resulting in social capital outside of the school simply by increasing community access to space and resources.

Bridging the communities

A particular focus has been placed on engaging the Somali families who historically would not step foot in the school. An important shift in this attitude was seen when a group of Somali women were encouraged to become parent governors and the school reorganised the way its governors met to include interpreters and make the new members feel valued and welcome. The head believed that the best indicator of progress came when a Somali family complained to him about the way a teacher had treated their child. This demonstrated that they had confidence in being listened to and treated with respect. African Caribbean and Somali families were also brought together through a parent cookery workshop that resulted in families cooking for each other. These are all classic examples of how schools can create a good balance of bonding and bridging social capital to promote community cohesion.

Focus interviews: School B

Context

This school serves a diverse and multicultural neighbourhood with a high level of poverty that sits either side of a busy road into the city centre. The residents have become increasingly fragmented due to an artificial division of housing stock within the locality and differences in the aspirations of the communities. Currently, the local authority has introduced a Think Family initiative in the area to improve co-ordination of and access to services. Residents commented on the caring and co-operative nature of the locality where although the streets are busy and crowded, it feels like a safe place to live.

“People stop and talk to each other and are neighbourly.”

However, they also pointed out the stark difference in the two communities, stating that,

“it’s not that safe or caring over there!”

Ethos and leadership

The headteacher arrived at the school as deputy head and has recently been promoted following the retirement of her predecessor. As such she had already built up many relationships with the pupils, staff and parents. She believes the moral purpose of the school is to support families and the local community by raising aspirations and that the best route to this aim was for the school to provide access to on-site support and wider training opportunities. Many of the parents lacked the resilience to face obstacles and gave up easily, so the school should also be a place of encouragement, support and the recognition of achievement. This is achieved through creating networks and building trust. The local authority was attempting to create more locally accessible services and support mechanisms but the head recognised that this would only be successful if the services were accessible on the school site, as the parents would not walk to the Sure Start children’s centre where they did not know the staff.

The head recognised the benefits of her own childhood experience when the school was a social centre for the wider community, and wanted to be able to recreate that same provision in the locality she now serves. A fundamental characteristic of the school ethos was the desire to allow the community as much access to the school and its premises as possible. This was possible because of the on-site school caretaker who was a well-respected member of the local community. The head described that what they now had was “an open school”.

She also described an aspiration that the school might become a neutral place for the two competing tenants’ associations. She wanted to see them using the school as common and shared ground, and thus begin to develop greater partnership in the hope that this would lead to increased trust and improved communication between the two communities. However, she also recognised that this was a long-term aim and that the school would have to do a tremendous amount of work to facilitate the process.

Relationship between the school and community

Parents believed the school to be caring and welcoming, and that it “blends into the community” rather than being seen as a traditional institution. They valued the fact that if there were any problems, they could share concerns with any member of staff. In the playground they advocated this approach with the more hard-to-reach parents. They also appreciated the wide range of opportunities that the school provided for families and the wider community to come together and to get to know each other better. They made particular reference to the fact that the school supported the setting up of a parents’ café that was run by and for parents, and that parents could have breakfast with their children at the breakfast club.

The school was seen as an integral part of the neighbourhood, attempting to engage with people in the wider community through open invitation to community celebrations, for example, St George's Day. Parents saw the open school policy as a major asset that had led to a reduced crime rate and made the school feel like a safe haven. Parents stated that, "even though there is the hustle and bustle of the main road, the school makes it feel like you can breathe a bit". They also believed that in doing this, the school was reaching out to local people even if they had no children at the school, and becoming a centre for the whole community. A crucial factor in this open school approach was the role of the school caretaker who had a history of family members at the school and held a position of respect within the wider community; the caretaker was an obvious bridge between the school and its neighbours. Recently the school has acquired an external unit as a community facility, and is looking forward to extending the out-of-hours use of the school for adult education and community meetings.

Key mechanisms to promote social capital

Developing community leaders

One of the school's main visions is that through a combination of training, opportunities and mediation, the school would become a significant resource for local people who wished to contribute their skills for the whole community. This includes adult education and family learning as well as informal learning circles that encourage skills of hospitality as well as the ability to lead meetings and engage others. This is evident in the work done with other local schools and the Workers Education Association to empower parents to become leaders within their peer groups. Learning circles were set up and parents were encouraged to share and learn from others across the schools. Resources and a venue were provided for the parents to set up their own parents' café which not only provided a social space but also helped them develop a programme of workshops to improve the communication and support given by other agencies.

The parents' café is a superb example of how schools can increase participation, develop self-efficacy and create self-maintaining social networks. If successful, it creates all three forms of social capital: bonding parents within the school, bridging across different groups and linking the parents into people and agencies that can improve their own life outcomes. However, bonding effects of social capital in such groups could also lead to an exclusive clique that exists for its own self-perpetuation. Another community leadership development initiative was the head's attempts to encourage the tenants' associations to work in collaboration. The potential impact on community organising is evident, although it will need a significant increase in trust, reciprocity and social cohesion, and the school may need to be proactive in creating the conditions for this to occur.

Access to the premises

The 'open school' approach is obviously reaping benefits as shown by the perception the community has of its locality. Providing a 'space to breathe' has an obvious impact on community wellbeing and encouraging a sense of belonging. The roll of the on-site caretaker is a clear demonstration of how a respected person (rather than a programme of planned activities) can have a significant effect on how people perceive their community. However, the school recognised the need to ensure that effective community engagement was not just dependent on one person.

Developing on-site provision for the family and the community

The reluctance of families to seek support outside of their immediate locality is an issue faced by many schools in challenging areas. There is a careful balance to be made between providing support (and sometimes challenge) without creating a dependency culture. This school demonstrates clearly the importance of co-located, multidisciplinary pastoral teams to meet the needs of the whole family from within the school. Pupils, parents and staff have access to immediate support without having to be referred to busy external services. The lesson from recent public investment to address the achievement gap that exists for those in poverty is that the most effective and long-term impact results from a 1:1 relationship of trust and support.

The potential social capital this creates is wide-ranging and effective across a range of contexts to improve participation and engagement and to give people a better sense of control over their own lives. It increases the trust between school and community and enables isolated families to access social support. This is a good example of how linking social capital works, giving individuals more control and options to improve their life outcomes. It is interesting that in all the Ofsted reports there was a strong sense of pupils knowing exactly who to turn to if they had a problem and being confident that they would find support. This school's approach to pastoral support affords the same benefits to parents. The future challenge will be how to maintain funding for these additional posts.

Case studies

Families and Schools Together (FAST)

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is an approach to bring together local support services to build protective factors around children, to improve parenting and to connect families to their schools (McDonald et al. 2006). It is a partnership between school and families based on research about parent empowerment, community development, brain development, social capital, risk and resiliency. It requires a series of eight multi-family social gatherings in the partner school where parents and their children meet together, eat together and learn together. In the short term, the programme aims to improve family functioning, parental involvement in education and parent social support and relationships. This is measured through a suite of evaluation tools that determine, among other things, self-efficacy, social interaction and reciprocity in parent support.

The programme has been shown to improve pupils' academic performance, parent-child relationships and parental engagement with the school. The long-term benefits have been that a significant number of friendships developed through the course continue for many years later. Middlesex University evaluated a recent programme delivered by a Manchester primary school in partnership with Save the Children (McDonald & Fitzroy 2010). Their report demonstrated significant increases in many aspects of social capital, such as:

- family cohesion increased by 13 per cent
- social relationships in the community improved by 23 per cent
- total reciprocal support increased by 66 per cent (with a 132 per cent increase in the support families received from others)
- there were also significant health benefits, with significant decreases in smoking, drinking alcohol and the use of recreational drugs

Here the school's role was not to lead but to support and facilitate a community development process. This meant providing premises, training opportunities and being advocates to the approach. The parents attending the course were diverse in ethnicity and social context. Many were living in challenging circumstances and all had felt isolated at some time. There was a rich mix of bonding and bridging social capital generated, and the challenge for this group is how to maintain the levels of peer support that led to these positive outcomes.

Curriculum for Community (C4C)

A group of Manchester primary schools have been collaborating for the last three years on a community-based approach to curriculum development. Learning is organised along three strands (culture, wellbeing and enterprise), and local learning resources (for example, local people) are used as the context for a skills-based curriculum. Apart from improved standards, it was hoped that this would have a longer-term impact on the local community through the development of social capital to achieve the following outcomes:

- develop a sense of local pride
- improve aspirations for the community
- create a sense of identity
- improve commitment to the local community

Initial findings showed an improvement in attitudes to learning, a developing interest in local places and improved parental involvement in learning. Some initial gains in pupil achievement were also demonstrated. The institutional impact of this collaboration has been significant, leading to reciprocity, a sense of efficacy to deliver a meaningful curriculum and a wide range of formal and informal networks that have developed a sense of belonging among staff and pupils. During times of challenge, the collaborative group has become a source of support for staff.

Pupils across the schools have been involved in collaborative work that has built friendships and a sense of excitement. One of the most powerful developments is the school council collaboration that develops pupils' sense of personal efficacy through visits to each other's schools, sharing ideas and suggesting improvements both for the schools they visit and their own.

Various curriculum initiatives have led to strong relationships being developed and strengthened with local residents and community partners. This has significantly increased the teachers' knowledge of the community and the community's respect for the schools. Although the long-term impact remains to be evaluated, this is becoming a powerful example of how a planned curriculum can generate bonding and bridging social capital within the neighbourhood and the institution.

Community action networks

Two neighbouring primary schools that were involved in the National College Better Together programme collaborated in holding local community conversations. The aim was to develop a sense of belonging, reciprocity and corporate responsibility for learning. A world café approach (www.theworldcafe.com) was used to ask three very broad questions:

- Where do I go to learn new things?
- Who do I learn new things from?
- What new things can others learn from me?

A cross-section of professional agencies, community organisations and local residents were involved in each conversation with a commitment to ensure that at least 50 per cent of the participants were residents of the local community. Dialogue was facilitated to ensure equity of voice and engagement of all participants. In each school the event and participants represented the differing local community context and the conversation identified different strengths and needs. The outcomes have informed the approach each school has since taken to community engagement.

Following the conversations, both schools set up community action networks that meet regularly to plan further school-community collaborations. The membership of these groups varies but has included parents, pupils, staff and governors from the school alongside members of the local regeneration team, Sure Start, extended schools, churches, community associations and community development workers. As a result, the schools have been directly involved as partners in local community-wide celebrations, intergenerational learning initiatives and healthy eating projects. Members of the community association and regeneration team have become school governors, and a strong sense of the school as an integral part of the community has emerged. At one school, plans are currently underway to set up a joint school-community management team to oversee the use of the school facilities out of school hours.

The impact of this work has extended beyond the neighbourhood and institution. One community development worker has been inspired to host community conversations in a variety of formal and informal settings across the city. In addition, the schools have facilitated conversations in multi-agency contexts, thus creating reciprocity, shared responsibility and a sense of efficacy within the wider infrastructure. This points to a key role that schools can play as facilitators and hosts for initiatives that have a direct impact on the nature and degree of social capital beyond the institutional boundaries.

Secondary school family intervention model

In identifying the need for a more holistic approach to achievement, behaviour and attendance at a secondary school in South Gloucester, it developed a model of parental engagement to address the underlying family issues. Many parents who were targeted had been oppositional and avoidant, thus making them hard to reach. Therefore much of the provision revolved around building self-esteem and self-efficacy within the family, and included a number of approaches:

- targeted weekend family learning sessions that built not only self-esteem but developed the relationship both within and between families
- ‘Taming the Teenager’ sessions run by a behaviour consultant
- ‘Family, Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)’ for parents’, with a specific focus on improving the communication and relationships between the school and a targeted group of parents
- universal parenting sessions run by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- whole family behaviour training sessions run in conjunction with Barnardo’s
- hosting a social work student placement for 16 weeks to support home visits, mentoring and follow-up

The school has realised that to engage with these parents is very difficult and requires a range of approaches. More importantly, it requires relationships of trust and mutual respect. What has been very successful is the co-ordinated work across a range of professionals from the wider children’s service and crucially, the value of social work training placements. Barnardo’s also proved a far more effective model for engagement as it worked alongside the whole family rather than targeting parents alone. This empowerment approach quite clearly promoted a range of social capital themes including participation, trust, self-efficacy and control within the family. It also developed reciprocity and peer networks in the institution and beyond in the wider infrastructure.

Conclusions

What effective strategies can schools employ to promote social capital within families and the wider community?

Trusting relationships

Mulgan (2010) suggests that directly addressing the quality of relationships is the way to create public value. Good schools model this principle by demonstrating a high degree of all forms of social capital, as was clear from the trust that pupils and parents placed in their school and the resulting sense of belonging. They offer welcome, care and support to individuals who feel valued through an inclusive ethos where diversity is celebrated. Parents' own skills are recognised as assets and a strong focus on peer support and pupil voice creates the sense that it is their school and their community. However, it is unclear whether the social capital generated has a fundamental impact on how adults and pupils behave towards each other in the wider community.

Pastoral teams and informal learning

The role of the family workers, therapists and social work students has been shown to be crucial in promoting various forms of social capital. However, Illich et al. (1977) clearly warn of the dangers associated with a dependency on professionals. Mulgan (2010) coined the term 'delivery state' to describe current models of service delivery. In some schools effective and sustainable pastoral intervention was facilitated through informal learning to build capacity and effective peer support mechanisms. A good example was demonstrated in the FAST programme. This capacity-building approach reduced the dependency on professional intervention while promoting family and community resilience. Empowering communities and encouraging social responsibility are two of the key pillars of the government's attempt to create the 'Big Society' (Cabinet Office 2010).

Access to resources

Many schools valued the local community as a resource for learning. However, significant development of social capital was only seen when this vision encompassed their reciprocal role as hubs both resourcing the local community and being resourced by it. Opening up premises as social spaces and facilitating community learning developed a strong sense of reciprocity and partnership between the school and community. It has been suggested that even with delegated power, some communities may still not have the capacity and the resources to thrive, and that small groups may become strongly bonded around common identities, resulting in little reciprocity with other community groups (Big Society Public Service Seminars 2010b). Access to school resources can facilitate bridges between different sections of the community (for example, ethnic groups or different tenants' associations) and provide opportunities for them to come together, to learn about each other and to support each other. Bridging social capital in this form is a powerful mechanism to promote community cohesion, to celebrate the value of cultural diversity and to develop a sense of shared identity.

Promoting community leadership

Park (2010) suggests that Free Schools may give the whole school community a stronger voice. True participation will only occur when citizens are involved in both service design and service delivery (Mellor et al. 2010). The capacity of schools to empower decision-making and promote leadership was clearly embodied in the promotion of pupil voice. Good schools model healthy communities and promote civic engagement, commitment to personal responsibility and social cohesion. When schools promoted parent and community voice (for example, community action networks and community conversations) their influence extended beyond the institution, becoming important assets that were seen as integral to community development.

A community-based curriculum

Schools that explored the local community and placed it at the centre of their curriculum were consistently noted to develop a sense of identity in the pupils. They also improved awareness of community-level structures, and developed a sense of individual and corporate responsibility for the locality, resulting in civic engagement and a strong sense of local pride. The curriculum is one of the key tools by which schools can promote social justice, and Coote (2010) suggests that unless social justice is the main goal of public service, then the benefits of the 'Big Society' to citizens will be limited.

What are the main barriers to community engagement and empowerment?

Limited vision?

Too great a focus on short-term and immediate outcomes to improve academic attainment in pupils may have nurtured a myopic approach to school improvement. Many successful schools in this study had inspirational leaders who were driven by moral conviction and committed to a wider, more holistic vision of the school as an agent for social change across the whole community. Coote (2010) suggests that change at a local level will be short lived if the inequalities of the wider context do not change. If schools in challenging contexts fail to focus on their impact in the wider community, they may have little impact on the long-term future lives of their pupils.

Limited leadership?

Unfortunately, after what Illich et al. (1977) called the 'age of disabling professions', many in our society have learned to be passive recipients of public support services. Mulgan (2010) has recently suggested the creation of the relational state, where public value is a product of the relationship between provider and client (for example, school and community). This is demonstrated in the emerging public service delivery model of co-production (Boyle et al. 2010), which recognises people as assets, builds on their existing capabilities, promotes mutuality and reciprocity and develops peer support networks. Effective schools can be seen as ideal role models for this process. Good schools have demonstrated the ability to do this within the institution and now need to develop these approaches when working with the wider community. This means having to take risks and devolving decision-making responsibilities.

Limited access?

Schools are probably the single biggest investment of public funds in the community. While secondary schools have been able to invest in community libraries, sports centres and other shared facilities, primary schools often have limited capacity to promote out-of-school access to their premises. This has been overcome in schools with on-site caretakers or who employ local people as key holders, and suggests that access to premises needs to become a shared responsibility between the school and community. At a time when the 'Big Society' is encouraging local community groups to take on the challenge of empowerment and local activism, it is those communities with least access to resources and facilities that will find it difficult to respond. If schools can find sustainable mechanisms to allow these communities access to resources, the move to empowerment may be distributed more equitably.

Recommendations

This report identifies good and outstanding practice in school-community engagement that results in healthy communities through the creation of social capital. It suggests that providers and policy-makers consider a number of key challenges:

- Improve the understanding of how schools can have an increasing impact on the wider community to influence the family and social context within which children and young people learn. The indicators of social capital used in this report might provide valuable qualitative measures of wider school effectiveness.
- Promote the role of school-community leadership, thus challenging the culture of exclusive professionalism and ensuring that social justice is at the heart of school improvement.
- Support the capacity of schools to resource local community partners, thus ensuring the role of the schools as the hub of the local community. Schools need to become building blocks of civil society in cases where community groups cannot take on more responsibility and where linking social capital does not flourish independently (Big Society Public Service Seminars 2010b).

This provides a challenge for the National College and other leadership development agencies to maintain programmes that promote a more holistic understanding of how schools, families and communities work together to improve life outcomes for children and young people. Social capital is the key to this process (Rowson et al. 2010), and schools are obviously rich sources or generators of such capital. What is required to enable this process to become more widespread is a clear, well-communicated vision for the role of schools in the 'Big Society' and its incorporation into future national directives and targets.

However, it must be recognised that schools cannot do this in isolation. All of the schools in this report have been proactive in developing partnerships, collaborations and networks to achieve their aim. What is now required is that all other services seek out community-sensitive school leaders and identify their community partners. In the words of a Native American community leader, they need to "sit down and see what life we can make for all our children".

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Appendix A: Office for National Statistics social capital themes and associated indicators

Social capital theme	Indicators within the wider community
<p>Participation, social engagement and commitment</p> <p>How effectively school influences the community and the community influences school. How it promotes engagement and commitment in pupils, families and local community members. Also, how it fosters a sense of responsibility for others and their community. Examples might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — extra-curricular activities — attitudes to responsibilities — participation in church/community events — fundraising — visits/visitors — volunteer work in/by the local community — action on local/environmental/global issues — positions of responsibility — effectiveness of school council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — participation or involvement in local groups — perceived barriers to involvement in local groups — level/intensity of involvement in local groups — participation in voluntary schemes connected with work — political activity or voting — membership of clubs, for example, RSPCA, WWF — taking positive action about a local issue — religious activity — completed or received a practical favour — provide regular service, help or care for others — familiarity with neighbourhood
<p>Control and self-efficacy</p> <p>How effectively school gives pupils and adults a sense of control over their own lives. This includes development of self-esteem/emotional wellbeing and how they might influence decision-making in communities and organisations. It engenders a belief that their actions/opinions make a difference. Examples of this might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — promotion of equal opportunities — effective pupil/parent voice — pupils in significant positions of responsibility — teamwork, collaboration and co-operation — mental health in schools programmes — inclusive school improvement planning — Healthy Schools awards — pupils proud of school and achievements — effective citizenship curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — perceived control over community affairs — perceived control over own health — perceived control possessed by organisations — satisfaction with amount of control over life — perceived rights and responsibilities of citizens — perceived influence over political decisions — perceived satisfaction with life — measures of psychological control or empowerment

<p>Perception of community-level structures or characteristics</p> <p>How effectively school audits the characteristics of the local, national and global community then builds this awareness into the learning opportunities for pupils, staff and families. This should be evident in the way that the school community engages with and seeks to improve both itself and the wider community. Examples of this might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — visits to and by the local community — structured community audit and policy — ECO Award Scheme, School Travel Plan, Sustainability Plans, Healthy Schools awards — pupil voice in school audit as part of school improvement planning, for example, Pupil Attitudes to School and Self (PASS) — parent/community voice as part of school improvement planning, for example, community conversations — pupil/parent involvement in local social action projects, for example, Respect weeks, Health Promotion weeks, Anti-Bullying weeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — satisfaction/enjoyment of living in local area — degree to which societal-level variables are seen as relevant to health — rating of local noise problem — rating of cleanliness, graffiti, vandalism — rating of area resources and services (leisure activities, rubbish collection) — rating of health services — rating of socioeconomic inequality — rating of education services — perceptions of crime, safety, victimisation — availability of good local transport — feeling of safety in the neighbourhood — rating of facilities for children
<p>Social interaction, social networks and social support</p> <p>How effectively school creates a community spirit. This will be evident in the quality and depth of relationships in the school community. It will also be about supporting families and communities in the development of support networks through training, meeting places and signposting. It also includes the range of activities accessible by pupils and adults in the school community, that is, extended provision. Examples of this might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — quality of play provision during break and lunchtimes — pastoral responsibilities for pupils, for example, play pals — behaviour and relationships — parent/family support programmes and groups — important other adults (role models) — school-based social events — wide range of clubs and extra-curricular activities — high quality spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development — links with other schools locally, nationally and internationally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — proximity of friends/relatives — contact with friends, family and neighbours: quality or frequency — perceived barriers to contacts with friends/ neighbours — has someone to rely on outside household — received practical help/advice for bringing up children — depth of socialisation networks, specifically leisure — perceived norms of social support — social relations at work

<p>Trust, reciprocity and social cohesion</p> <p>How pupils and adults in school build relationships and attitudes that allow them to work together effectively irrespective of difference. How school encourages a sense of community spirit, delayed gratification and the need to support each other. Examples might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — audit of local community — pupil awareness of local community — SMSC development — quality of care, guidance and support — equality and diversity promoted — discrimination actively challenged — confidence in pupil voice — trust in adults — willingness to look after each other — confidence in the school (pupils and adults) — pupil values mirror schools — racial and cultural awareness and harmony — collaboration and co-operation — wide range of role models (local, national and international) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — satisfaction with level of information about local area issues — length of residence in area/neighbourhood — confidence in institutions and public services — trust in other people — perceived fairness of life, including discrimination — confidence in political structures — social trust — perception of shared values, reliability
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Source: Adapted from Ruston & Akinrodoye (2002)

Appendix B: AERS social capital contexts and associated indicators

Social capital context	Indicators
<p>Family social capital</p> <p>How proactive and effective school is in promoting social capital that has a direct impact on families within school. This may result in the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — improved relationships within and between families — improving the access of vulnerable families to appropriate support — increasing the involvement of family members in activities with other members of the community — promoting family learning both in the home and in the wider community — identification and removal of barriers to access and involvement of families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — proximity of family — interactions with family — practical/assistance — learning/leisure activities — social support — family-based networks — barriers to family interactions — intergenerational contact
<p>Neighbourhood social capital</p> <p>How effective school activities raise or support local capital that is active in the neighbourhood that the school serves. This may result in the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — promoting how well the community knows itself — improving access to agencies and organisations — improved perception of community safety/wellbeing — improved community dialogue — celebration of community values, strengths — increased use of the school as a hub to serve the community — promotion of equality, diversity and inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — safety and fear of crime — familiarity with neighbourhood — provide/receive favour in neighbourhood — rating of neighbourhood (for example, cleanliness) — number of friends in neighbourhood

<p>Community organisation social capital</p> <p>How effectively school activities promote a sense of community efficacy that challenges the often present apathy. This may result in the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — willingness to join local community groups — increased access to premises and resources to allow these groups to function — wider opportunities for formal and informal learning — increased awareness of hard-to-reach groups and a willingness to engage them in community activities — political and civic activism to challenge on local issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — number of local groups/membership — perceived barriers to involvement — intensity of participation — taking action through local groups
<p>Institutional social capital</p> <p>How effective school activities promote social capital within itself and within formal organisations that it works alongside. This may result in the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — an increased sense of loyalty and belonging within the school community — pupils enjoy school (and as a result attend) — staff are an effective and valued team — improved communication with pupils, parents and the wider community — pupils show increased sense of personal responsibility — diversity is valued, equality is actively promoted and inclusion is embedded in the school ethos — improved behaviour without having to rely on formal sanctions — wide range of networks with other schools and agencies — effective care, guidance and support is a key feature of the school — pupil/parent voice is effective and leads to change — the school and community co-operate in challenging local/national and global issues — effective and involved governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — contacts with school — attitudes to school — social activities school related — friendship networks — participation in school governance — relationships with teachers — relationships with other professionals — communications and information — responsiveness to particular issues

<p>Infrastructure</p> <p>How effectively the school and its partners can promote social capital in the above contexts by challenging city-wide services and provision. This results in the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — improved dialogue and effective practice of multi-agency partnerships — co-ordinated and effective family support — improved awareness/action on sustainable transport — improved awareness/action on local road safety issues — improved community safety — enhanced and respected local environment — people wanting to stay in the community have appropriate housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — availability and quality of public transport — availability and quality of health services — services, for example, rubbish collection — quality of housing stock
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Source: Adapted from AERS (2006)

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