

Growing Social Capital in the Classroom

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Classroom supplies can become this thing of the haves and have-nots. Some students don't have the ability to bring in supplies others do, and I really don't like that. I instead collect and make them available to everyone. (Pamela, Interview series, 7.15.14)

Pamela,¹ a third grade teacher, exemplifies the teacher-as-protective agent. In the statement above she captures what may look like a modest effort to equalize social relations in the classroom. Sharing school supplies appears, indeed, a simple, even an irrelevant routine activity, but upon closer examination one realizes that deeper and complex issues are at stake. This article aims at explaining how seemingly uneventful classroom activities contain the potential to building social capital in the classroom, which occurs when and if teachers carry them out intentionally and systematically. We explore the idea that, of all social institutions, school classrooms represent the most formidable soil for social capital to grow.

Following Coleman (1988) our study defined social capital as the social worthiness embedded in relationships. Thus, social capital con-

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veys the idea that social ties contain intrinsic value that functions in the way that money does in the capitalist economic system. In other words, the usefulness of social relationships hold the potential to being transported, accumulated, exchanged, and transferred (Arriaza, 2015; Kingston, 2001).

This article first reviews the extant literature on social capital as it relates to schools and communities; second, it discusses the core findings through the prism of social capital theory, specifically around trust and reciprocity. The article closes with a discussion on the implications of the findings.

Literature Review

At the core of social capital sits the networking activity of individuals and social groups. Stanton-Salazar (2004) noted that social networks in schools certainly offer the needed connections for individuals to access “resources and forms of support” (p. 18). The added value each individual brings to the network may increase its resourcefulness to the benefit of the network’s membership. In this sense teachers function as protective agents, who facilitate social interaction and thus aiding students to access resources that, in turn, increase their life chances (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). These dynamics occur within a context grounded by trust and reciprocity.

Putnam (2000) argued that trust operates relationally and cultivates reciprocity when people actively participate in the give-and-take of their network. Even those who do not reciprocate, or who may migrate away from their network, Putnam notes, may benefit. The former by the immediate benefits of, say bringing school supplies to the classroom, and the latter by using these utensils, or by taking with them established relationships and knowledge that may accrue some benefits in a new environment.

Cook (2001), Sobel (2002), Goddard (2003), Tilly (2005), and Lin and Erickson (2010) have argued that trust is both source and outcome of social capital. It consists of the willingness to rely, for instance, on others’ advice or actions, or to make one available to aid others. According to Offer and Schneider (2007) trust manifests in places where the “investment in the formation and maintenance of social relationships” (p. 127) is important to building social capital; as Coleman (1988) pointed out, groups with high levels of trust accomplish more than groups with low levels. Moreover, Pong, Hao, and Gardner (2005) found a direct correlation between trust and reciprocity, shared expectations and obligations—the stronger or weaker the former, so may be the latter. Similarly, Goddard (2003) emphasized that social networks engender relationships, and Coleman (1990) found that when individuals establish relationships with

high levels of trust the network members are more inclined to exchange knowledge.

As we stated earlier, schools comprise one of society's most vibrant institutions; they pull in multitude of networks. In their physical space converge simultaneously a variety of individuals who bring in social connections from their neighborhoods, sport clubs, friends, families, employment, and so do their children.

Studies of social capital in schools have mostly centered around parental networks and their impact on the schooling of children (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; DeShera-Rodriguez, 2008; Donato, 1997; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003), immigrant and ethnic networks and schools (e.g., Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Mundt, Gregory, Melz & McWayne, 2015; Trainor, 2010), adolescents and social capital (e.g., Boyd, 2007; Cotterell, 2013; Stanton-Salazar & Urso Spina, 2003), or faculty networks (e.g., Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Bianchi and Robinson (1997), for instance, looked at children 11 years old and younger, from varied family structure backgrounds. The researchers explained that studying children younger than nine seemed more reliable through their parents. They found that children, whose parents have higher formal education, tended to build cognitive skills—understood by the authors as social capital—transferable to the context of schooling. Lee and Bowen's (2006) quantitative study included a large sample of parental participation in the schooling of 3rd to 6th graders; the study looked at how such involvement benefited their children's academics. The researchers found that while a differential existed in terms of White dominant groups gaining higher benefits than ethnic minorities, both groups did experience overall important paybacks relative to their involvement.

Hopkins, Martinez, Wenzl, Aldana, & Gándara (2013) chose four young immigrant adults—out of a group of eighty students who belonged to four high schools—for an in-depth case study. It revealed that in spite of these students' limited English language fluency, they were able to advance their academic education up to their age level, understand college prerequisites, and application process. This growth, the study found, was essentially due to rigorous bilingual instruction and the existence of a network of teachers and counselors, who acting as protective agents dedicated to foster a climate of support.

Stanton-Salazar and Urso Spina (2003), studying a network of adults supporting immigrant youth, uncovered the value added this network brought to the young adults, who were, interestingly enough, not relatives. This network functioned as a place for informal, unrestricted, yet deeply committed to meaningful mentoring, which over time rendered

benefits similar to those offered by the formal and limited counseling high schools provide.

The available literature seems thin in regards to teachers as building agents of social capital in elementary education. Thus, our study took a closer look at three teachers who intentionally generated trust and reciprocity among early graders. This qualitative case study was conducted in Pamela's elementary school for about six months. The central data collection approach consisted of participant observer and interviews. Three classrooms and the schoolyard were the two spaces observed. We organized and analyzed data applying HyperResearch.

The school is located in a mid-size city in Silicon Valley, northern California. While situated in an area of one-million-dollar houses, and a mean household annual income of about one hundred thousand dollars, very few children from the surrounding community do attend this school. The vast majority of the school's population originates from the city's dilapidated neighborhoods, particularly the old downtown. According to the U.S. Census of 2010, six out of every ten families identify themselves as Latino in this area, one of every three adults holds less than a high school formal education, and ten percent live below the poverty level.

Discussion of Findings

We organized this section into the two observation spaces. First we discuss what the data revealed in the classroom, then we discuss what we uncovered in the playground during free play time.

Networking in the Classroom

The act of jointly using resources, whether collectively or individually owned, contains the possibility of building trust among students. Participants viewed sharing school supplies as donating and dividing them equally. Participants also interpreted sharing as the means to contribute to the classroom's supplies inventory, for the benefit and, somehow, the prosperity of the whole class. Elizabeth explains this issue clearly:

I told them [students] that these supplies were for the whole class. I had them put them in one big pile and then we distributed [all the items]. All the students were okay with this. (Elizabeth, Interview series, 10.8.14)

Prior to collectivizing resources, Elizabeth dutifully communicated with parents about this activity, and no parent opposed or raised questions about it. Thus, rather than each student bringing in personal items for individual use, from the very first day of classes Elizabeth asked them to, instead, bring supplies explicitly to be shared. She further explains:

Issues in Teacher Education

At the beginning of the school year most of my students brought supplies. I told them that these supplies were for the whole class. (Interview series, 10.15.14)

Moreover, participants wanted to play down socio-economic difference among children by homogenizing all supplies. These had to meet certain criteria—from color, shape, and style to the brand name—to render impossible to connect individuals to objects, as Pamela noted, she didn't "want the students knowing who brought what, so that is why I required particular items such as expo pens, pink erasers, yellow pencils, so no one can tell who brought in what" (Pamela, Interview series, 8.10.14).

Anonymity seemed central to further the intentional effort to de-emphasize economic privilege, or the lack of. Pamela explained that children had access to supplies at any moment of the day, to replenish their materials without having to ask permission from her. She described the situation this way:

Each group has one container of supplies per table. In these containers are minimal supplies. A larger collection of supplies is in the corner of the classroom. When an item runs out from its table container, they [students] can replenish it. They all have to share the supplies from the container. (Interview series, 11.20.14)

Even in the case where students kept their individual property, yet sharing it freely with others, seemed to have contributed to a general sense of sharing. In these cases no common supply area existed; children, notwithstanding, helped each other in a quite naturalized fashion. Michele, who encouraged such habit, and who did not request supplies from parents at the opening of the school year, explained: "What I have observed is if they notice that someone needs an eraser they will tell their classmate 'you can have mine,'" and concluded:

They are pretty kind to each other when it comes to sharing classroom supplies. They have no problems sharing any of their classroom materials with one another. (Michele, Interview series, 2.14.14)

The sharing of items in the fashion thus far described suggests that there exists the potential to intentionally build trust. As we have shown, the classroom environment promotes resources for the good of all through their collective use. Students, as shown above, could bring in personal items, but teachers emphasized and nurtured a sense of sharing. They sought to make anonymous individual requests of utensils as well as individual contributions of supplies homogeneous as a way to minimize affluent behavior, thus backgrounding students' socio-economic status. Pamela captured the parameters of such practice this way:

They can only bring in plain yellow pencils, plain pink or white erasers, and plain black or blue pens. They can put these items in their pencil boxes. The rest of the items they have are the supplies that they brought in at the beginning of the year. I am constantly adding markers, color pencils, and crayons to their group containers. I give students a new pencil each week so they are all the same so, in reality, students do not need to bring anything personal to the classroom because I give them everything they need. (Pamela, Interview series, 11.18, 13)

As the text above states, students in Pamela's class could bring in personal items as long as they followed her specific instructions, so that to remain consistent with the shared supplies in her classroom. Elizabeth too practiced something similar; she limited the number of personal items that students could bring in to the classroom. She stated: "I don't allow students to bring in a lot of personal items to the classroom," and added, "I decided to allow those who had a ruler from home to use it in the classroom because I didn't want their parents to be upset with me (Elizabeth, Interview series, 9. 8.13)

Elizabeth clearly shows how students followed, without exceptions, the established parameters for sharing. Both, Pamela's and Elizabeth's insistence on sharing items—either those made available to the class or those brought in by the students—decreased students' need to bring and show off more individual stuff which, to an extent, aided her efforts to deemphasized socio-economic background.

Sharing supplies and shortening social distance undergird community-building practices. We have documented the former in the sections above. As for the latter, it appeared clear to us that all teacher participants also implemented a variety of activities geared towards closing social distance. An example is how children got to know each other at a more personal level. Michelle describes how she, from the start of the school year "purposely set them up with students they don't really know; and then they get to interview them" (Michelle, Interview series, 2.14.2014). Students ask each other various questions so that they can learn more about each other's stories. Michelle asserted:

Through this specific activity, once students finish the interviewing phase they prepare a presentation on what they learned about their new friend. From that point on, and throughout the school year, they have opportunities to work with several classmates. (Michelle, Interview series, 2.14.2014)

Additionally, learning to network occurs through listening, talking about each other in front of the whole class, and through generally meeting classmates, and cultivating emerging friendships. Releasing this social energy may only show up later into the school year, as

friendship groups and new social entanglements consolidate and new ones spring up.

Pamela employed creating collective expectations, at the beginning of the school year, as an approach to building community. She points out how “as a class we discuss what we want to get out of the classroom, and the students create the agreements” (Pamela, Interview series, 2,13.2014). She facilitated this discussion while the students produced their own classroom social expectations. Allowing students to express what they believed seemed to both contribute to creating and owning the classroom community.

Pamela also established routine work that, in the aggregate, seemed to have strengthened the notion of the classroom-as-community. That was the function of a counselor’s systematic visit to the classroom. “One of the things that I do on a regular basis,” she explained, “is that we have a class counsel every Wednesday.” Pamela continued explaining:

Students are able to bring up issues both positive and negative. The class counselor runs the meeting. Students have to talk to each other specifically to work out their conflicts during the class counsel. (Interview series, 3.12.2014).

And then she added: “But they also acknowledge and celebrate classmates for contributions to improving the class environment” (Pamela, Interview series, 3.12.2014).

Safety is a floor condition for trust and reciprocity in community building. By establishing expectations (i.e. agreeing about socially acceptable behavior), Pamela facilitates the formation of a place where youngsters can address conflict, as well as to offer praise for doing something beneficial to all.. But the fact this activity occurred on a predictable time and format may also have generated the expectation that their classroom efforts enjoyed the school authorities’ support.

Additionally, Pamela moved beyond the space of the classroom and made her community-building practice a feature of the institution—the schedule. Besides involving the school counselor in the Wednesday’s counseling, this activity “has been ingrained in [the] weekly schedule,” she explains. “Because if we don’t have it, they [the students] get really upset. It’s definitely become part of the way our classroom runs” (Interview series, 3.12.2014).

Language mediates all and every one of the community-building activities thus far discussed. But when intentionally taught as a means to generating a shared vocabulary, then language takes on another dimension. It is a means for change. Participants used phrases, words and

symbols to talk about social behavior and to acknowledge good deeds. An emblematic example is Pamela's bucket. She tells how she reads at the start of the school year the book: "Have you filled someone's bucket today?" As a result, she:

Incorporated an actual bucket in the classroom. When [students] are kind to each other then they get to put stones in the bucket. (Interview series, 3.12.2014)

Additionally, as a result of this routine, Pamela explains,

Children even use the actual language from the book. They say to each other, 'you are not filling my bucket right now' or 'you just filled my bucket,' and then they put stones in the bucket. (Pamela, Interview series, 2.13.2014)

Getting to know each other leads students to the enactment of an environment for sharing. In this context then sharing, as we have shown thus far, becomes the primordial grounds for social networking.

In sum, the participants' classrooms infuse a shared set of values, collectively create expectations, establish a predictable counseling activity to allow children to deal with conflict, publicly recognize positive actions, integrate a symbolic representation of good deeds, and name these through a common language. Yet, the transfer of these classroom practices to other contexts posed a challenge to both teachers and children.

Networking in the Yard

We looked at networking dynamics in the schoolyard; we selected it since it seemed, outside the classroom, one of the most significant spaces for social networking throughout the school premises. We wanted to see how children transported and exchanged trust and reciprocity into this open space. We observed during free play how the participants' students related to each other, as well as to children from other classrooms. Besides our own direct observations, we asked participants to tell us about their own; we were specifically interested in friendship groups.

"Students from [the] same backgrounds sit together and eat together at the picnic tables," Elizabeth stated referring to the groups that originated back from previous years, but who now were her students. She continued: "Although they are eating in separate groups, they still are willing to share among each other." Then she added: "However, to be quite honest, I don't see them intermingling very much at the recess tables" (Elizabeth, Interview series, 11.8.2013).

The playground had four large picnic tables where students snacked. All students from third through fifth grade used these tables. When at

some point of the interview Elizabeth said: “intermingling,” as reaction to our description of the dynamics we observed, she was actually suggesting that youngsters from her classroom were inclined to sit with those they already knew, rather than with any other. Due to the locations they sat, she pointed out, very little interaction between the groups occurred across ethnic, gender, and socio-economic lines.

Upon close examination, we found that children tended to interact with what we described as familiar friendship groups. This is an excerpt entry from our field notes:

12.3.13. The bell just rang and students disperse to different areas on the playground. One of the heavily populated areas is the picnic-tables where students sit and eat their snacks. There are three girl groups, which seem a crossover of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The three boy groups, like the girls, all exhibit similar background composition.

We certainly observed that students devoted their free play time to socialize with whomever was familiar, and tended to mostly join preexisting gender-based groupings. Pamela confirmed our observation, but added some new details:

Groups that are pretty much always together are the students from the [surrounding] neighborhood and then the Latina girls. There is pretty much no mixing between these two groups. But then the rest of my students whose backgrounds are Tongan, African-American or Latino boys are much more flexible. Some days they will play with one group and then other days they will be in another groups. (Pamela, interview series, 2.13.14)

Pamela’s assertions suggest two networking dynamics that take place simultaneously during recess. The first is that some children gravitate around others either from their neighborhood, the same gender, or the same ethnic identification (i.e., Latina girls stick together). The second is that racialized groups appear to both mostly stay together while also being inclined to intermingle with children from different ethnic backgrounds.

Michelle also described how boys from her class seemed more likely to play with other boys from similar backgrounds. She stated:

I know for a fact that David, Mark, and Brad all play together at recess. Matt sort of gravitates towards Mark and when Brad came to our school he started to hang out with them too. They don’t have the same ethnic background but they do have the same socioeconomic backgrounds. (Michelle, Interview series, 2.14.14)

Although Pamela indicated that boys in her classroom were more inclined

to mix across ethnic groups, Michelle's observations suggest socioeconomics as the pull force. Clearly, networking in the playground offered multiple entry points for students to establish complex and at times fluid and contradictory relationships. On occasion, students would interact along the lines of neighborhood or gender; sometimes they intermingled along the lines of apparently common socioeconomic background. Sometimes some of them settled on residential identification. Nevertheless, they all showed that social bonding occurred particularly when a sense of the familiar appeared to exist.

Demographic change and mobility played as contributing factors to the changing networking dynamics. This was the case of some students from the surrounding neighborhood who transitioned to either private or public schools in the area. Contrary to the social patterns previously observed, this flight reconfigured some relationships. As Elizabeth reported, some girls from the surrounding neighborhood who remained at the site had to seek out new members for their friendship groups during free play time, and these had to come from the downtown area. She noted:

Due to this change [upper class, White flight], I see a little bit more intermingling among the girls than the boys. My girls socialize with the girls in the other classes on the yard. What I see are more girls from different socioeconomic groups mingling with each other. (Elizabeth, Interview series, 2.6.14)

Yet, data suggest that demographic changes have not necessarily brought significant variations to the formation of relationships among students. Although Pamela implemented classroom activities to form new friendship groups, students preferred to socialize with others from similar backgrounds in the playground. Pamela explained:

I mean, in the classroom I use several methods for students to interact with one another, but in terms of friendships students stick with students who are like them. When given the opportunity, they just routinely are attracted to people like them. I even know that the neighborhood students have play dates together and then there is a pocket of kids who live in the same apartment building that have play dates together. (Pamela, interview series, 11.18.2013)

When students were given opportunities to play with others outside the classroom in non-structured environments, some congregated and interacted with those showing salient ethnic, socioeconomic, place of residence, or gender markers. Others occasionally intermingled with students of different backgrounds, such as the case of some neighborhood girls hanging out with racialized boys.

Conclusions and Implications

As data show, teachers clearly hold the potential to build social capital in the classroom. Focusing on trust and reciprocity participant teachers infused the habit of sharing among youngsters. It appears that this act promoted an equalitarian environment where children gave up individually possessed objects. This activity contributed to backgrounding, albeit not completely ignoring, socio-economic difference. The intentionality of this patterned action helped children to shape, over time, some degree of social networking.

Trusting contains social value and, as the findings above point out, this fact implicates that reliance and confidence may grow among group members; it is a subjective state without which children may find it hard, if not impossible, to build healthy relationships. When trust exists individuals' willingness to work together increases. Similar to Goddard (2003) findings—that children, who attend schools with high levels of trust, are more likely to be better off than those who attend a school with low levels of trust—we uncovered community building as result of intentional activities engendering trust and reciprocity.

Participant teachers helped children to become trustworthy by simultaneously asking them to give up individual school supplies; they added these to the ones provided by the school or the teacher. Some participants requested children to bring identical items, thus homogenizing most supplies in the classroom. While clothing may more openly express socio-economic status, this activity seemed to have ameliorated the distance generated by income differential.

Sharing personal stories and the same type of school supplies aided to a sense of community. But when additional efforts were made—such as having a regular school schedule, inviting the school counselor to facilitate whole class conversations around social conflict on predictable days and times—the sense of community became part of the classroom's culture. Lastly, adopting common vocabulary to name actions may have consolidated trust and reciprocity, and glued the formation of a classroom community.

The peer-to-peer communication, support, and networking appear to have sprung throughout the three participants' classrooms. But these social dynamics did not always translate into public, spontaneous and fluid courtyard social networking. Contrary to what we expected (that social capital in the classroom would be transferable and exchanged to other spaces) children socialized differently in the schoolyard: mostly flocking towards the familiar.

Whether by gender, neighborhood, or ethnic background, youngsters'

relationships seemed more bounded by any of these three identifiers, rather than by an openly spontaneous, exchangeable, and transportable social capital. We speculated that the three participants' classrooms would socialize among them without regard to identity background; that the high sense of community had fastened their social networks, strongly enough for those relationships to continue outside the classroom. Instead, children tended to gravitate to pre-existing social networks. Even when some of the reconfigurations occurred, they seemed to reproduce either gender or socioeconomic affinities.

In closing, this study reveals the potential for social networking in the classroom and its limitations outside of it. The study additionally opens up a quest to discover the approaches that may make it possible for social networks to exchange and transfer trust and reciprocity nurtured in the classroom to the whole school.

Note

¹ All names are pseudonyms to insure privacy.

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