

Social Capital:  
Fostering Teacher Learning and Student Success

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**What is Social Capital?**

In just about every school across the United States, one is likely to find students of certain teachers consistently outperforming their peers on various measures, including standardized assessments. Traditionally, researchers have examined the individual instructional practices regularly utilized by these exceptional teachers in an attempt to explain or understand this phenomenon. However, recent studies have been looking beyond the practices and performance of individual teachers, and examining instead the collaborative practices of teachers, suggesting that social practices have as strong an impact on teacher and student learning as individual practices (Anrig, 2013; Bryk, 2010; Leana and Pil, 2006; Leana and Pil, 2009; Leana, 2011; Johnson, Lustick and Kim, 2011).

In *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital* (1988) James Coleman defined social capital as coming about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action. Notions of capital have traditionally been used in the economic sector to describe something that adds value to an organization (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2013), however more recently, social capital has been applied to school settings. In a school environment, social capital could include such factors as a teacher's advice network, where they go to for information, who they collaborate with, and who they

bounce ideas off of. Current reform efforts have largely focused on increasing the human capital of teachers (Leana, 2011). Human capital, as described by Coleman (1988), encompasses the individual skills and capabilities of persons. For a teacher, this could include an individual's years of experience, knowledge of content and pedagogical strategies, and level of education. Why are some teachers better than other? A human capital perspective would argue that some teachers are better trained, more gifted, or more experienced. A social capital perspective would take a different approach. Social capital theory could be used to argue that it is not just the teachers individual skills that make them a good teacher, but also their connections to and interactions with other teachers.

### **Benefits to Teachers, Students, and Principals**

Emerging research has attributed teacher social capital to higher levels of student achievement. In addition, social capital has been found to play an important role in principal success, and teacher learning. A large scale study conducted between 2005 and 2007 in the New York City public school system by University of Pittsburgh's Carrie Leana and Frits Pil analyzed both teacher human capital and social capital, while also looking at one year changes in student achievement in mathematics (Leana and Pil, 2009). The study found students showing higher gains in math achievement when teachers reported frequent conversations with their peers that centered around math. Teacher social capital was found to be a significant predictor of student achievement gains, and more significant than some human capital factors, including teacher

experience in the classroom. In addition, feelings of trust and closeness among teachers were found to contribute to student achievement gains. Interestingly, less skilled teachers seem to have benefited the most from social capital by becoming aware of the best practices of their more able peers through social interactions.

Another study, conducted by the Chicago Consortium on School Research examined hundreds of Chicago elementary schools that improved over time (Bryk, 2010). A significant commonality among these schools was found to be the professional capacity of the faculty, or the capability of teachers to work together to improve instruction and solve problems. Student learning improved at schools where positive work relations existed among colleagues. A central concern of principals at these schools was found to be building relational trust among teachers.

In addition to having an impact on student learning, social capital has been found to have an impact on teacher learning. In the Chicago study, principals of schools that improved over time provided teachers with building based professional development that was designed to enhance a sense of community and shared commitments (Bryk, 2010). Johnson, Lustick and Kim (2011) analyzed aspects of teacher social capital to describe the effects of a school wide professional program. They found that a social capital approach to professional development, characterized by teacher learning as a social process, can avoid some of the problems associated with individualized teacher learning. They argued that collaboration is essential to professional development because it forces teachers to put their instructional approach into words, gives teachers

a chance to think about new ideas, and invites them to consider their instruction from other points of view (Johnson et al., 2011)

Principal social capital also has been found to have an impact on the overall performance of a school. Leana and Pil deemed principal social capital significant in terms of school wide student achievement (Leana and Pil, 2006). Schools with principals who spent more time building external relations, with parents, community groups, or foundations, were found have higher levels of quality instruction and better student results in reading and mathematics on standardized assessments.

The clear benefits of social capital to teachers, students, and principals suggest that reform efforts designed to solely increase teacher human capital have been largely misguided. Leana (2011) proposed a shift in public school reform that would emphasize the power of the collective group, build trust and meaningful relationships among teachers, and re think the role of the principal. This shift would provide the conditions necessary to build social capital among a school's faculty.

### **Building Social Capital**

As mentioned, studies have found clear benefits of social capital for teachers, students and principals. As a building level administrator, how does one cultivate teacher social capital school wide though? Leana (2011) found effective principals acted more as facilitators, providing teachers with the tools needed to build social capital. Common barriers to effective teacher collaboration often involve lack of time, lack of space, lack of access to experts and specialists, and lack of instructional focus

among teacher teams. A good place to start would be examining these barriers in your school and brainstorming potential solutions through your master schedule, room utilization chart, and building level specialists.

A significant barrier to developing social capital among teachers continues to be time. Teachers need time built within the school day to be able to collaborate. Start by examining your master schedule. Does it include common time for not only grade level teachers to meet on a regular basis, but also subject area teachers? In addition to these opportunities, it is important to find time for vertical articulation, where teachers of the same discipline over multiple grade levels can regularly get together to discuss curriculum gaps and repetitions.

Another challenge to overcome is physical space. It is important to consider collaborative opportunities when developing the room utilization chart for your school. Are teachers' classrooms grouped together by grade level or subject area? At our school, we have noticed higher frequency informal collaborations taking place when this occurs. For example, two 8th grade math teachers may de brief or reflect on a lesson while simply standing at their door during transition time if their classrooms are located next to each other. Also, do teachers have a designated free space to meet during the school day? Because many classrooms are used all day long it is important to remember to keep certain spaces or classrooms open and free for teachers to be able to meet on a regular basis.

Teachers also need access to experts and specialists for information and advice. Often, these individuals can be found right within your own building. Building level

experts include, but are not limited to, department chairs and/ or team leaders, reading and math specialists, the school psychologist, and special education teachers. It is important to provide these specialists with the time and flexibility within their schedules necessary to be able to work with and assist groups of teachers as they collaborate on instructional issues.

A final word of caution, simply putting teachers in a room and expecting them to collaborate may not lead to the desired outcomes of improved student and teacher learning. Studies have found teacher learning communities not focused on instruction have had no impact on student achievement (Supovitz 2002; Supovitz and Christman, 2005). Discussions of these teams of teachers routinely centered around student behavior, field trips, fundraisers, administrative paperwork and other superficial items. In order for a learning community of teachers to be effective, it must make instructional issues a priority. Providing teachers with a common instructional goal, such as developing common assessments or curriculum maps, can help avoid this challenge and provide teams of teachers with greater focus.

Too often, schools rely on outside experts, textbook and testing companies, and pre packaged programs for the implementation of reform initiatives. However, the answers to true and meaningful reform may be found right within our own schools. Social capital clearly has the potential to transform both teacher and student learning, How will you work to build social capital at your school?

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