

Social Capital and Employability

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1. Abstract

Social capital is the process by which people form, use and break social networks and links. The forms of social capital include bonding bridging and linking SC. Both older and young people can exercise all three forms of SC in gaining choices and chances for employment and further education post school. However, those from disadvantaged circumstances often lack access to networks that can connect them to educational opportunities or jobs.

In this paper elements from three case studies conducted in Scotland in 2007/8 are presented to show how social capital can enable employment opportunities for younger people.

We concluded that people with weak social capital in their final year of primary school had difficulties in the transition to secondary school. We also noted that aspirations were largely informed by their family networks and people immediately connected to their families. Finally we concluded that young people at risk of leaving school early and facing unemployment lacked strong bridging and linking social capital and that this was a barrier to their choices and chances for further education and employment.

2. Introduction – transition studies

Studies of the transitions made by young people between stages of schooling have tended to focus on the curriculum and the continuity of formal learning and have largely ignored the pupil perspective. In research into the primary to secondary transition, most studies have defined learning in a very narrow sense as subject based attainment and the experiences of transition are unexamined in most studies from the perspective of the experiences of the young people (Galton et al 1999). A question that we addressed in the primary to secondary case study was the possibility that creating new peer social bonds was more difficult during the transition for young people who lacked strong social capital in their primary school, their home, and in

their immediate neighbourhood. In the youth club case study we asked how young people at this age frame their aspirations, and in the third case study in a work readiness programme for older youth we explored the experiences of early school leavers who had multiple sources of deprivation.

Research into post-school transition has been dominated by destination studies which usually rely on summary statistics. There has been little change in the transmission of social inequalities between generations in the past thirty years (Iannelli & Paterson, 2005) but little attention has been paid to the experiences of those young people who have multiple sources of disadvantage and are considered most at risk of not gaining access to employment or further education.

3. Literature review – meanings of social capital

The focus of this paper is on the roles played by various forms of social capital in the ways young people form their aspirations and gain access to further education and training. Social Capital is a term that has become popular in the past twenty years, in part because some have claimed economic and social benefits from ‘improved’ social capital (Putnam, 2000).

The meaning of the concept ‘social capital’ needs to be made explicit in the context in which it is applied before the effects of social capital can be described. We have found it to be helpful to think of three forms of social capital because social networks can be of substantively different forms and can have differential effects upon the opportunities for young people. The three general categories of social capital (SC) are bonding, linking and bridging SC. These categories were described by Catts and Ozga (2005) in terms of how they operate within schools and these descriptions can be generalised to include family and community settings.

BONDING social capital is characterised by strong bonds among group members: this form of social capital can help people to ‘get by’. It is valuable in building a sense of shared identity and security. Families may create strong bonds, and these may be very supportive and they may also involve sanctions on a young person to conform to family expectations. Peer groups can also demand loyalties and impose sanctions to conform to group norms. Siblings can be influential in the formation of peer networks especially outwith the school. Family and peer bonding social capital may influence

social behaviour and can affect the social identity that young people form, and hence the expectations they form out about education and employment.

BRIDGING social capital is a resource that helps people to build relationships with a wider, more varied set of people than those in the immediate family or neighbourhood, including in community groups where networks can be formed among young people and with adult volunteers or youth workers. Bridging social capital helps people to 'get on' and not just 'get by'. Bridging social capital is also understood as important in helping employment and career advancement, and hence encouraging bridging SC is an issue to be addressed in order to achieve more choices and more chances for young people.

LINKING social capital enables connections between people across differences in status. This may be evident for example in links between parents of children attending a church or community group who are from different backgrounds. Linking SC may help youth workers to link parents and children from different social, religious or ethnic backgrounds. Linking SC connects individuals with agencies or services that they would not otherwise access easily. Linking social capital may help people 'get around'.

Field (2005, 32) argues that bridging and linking social capital offers alternative and potentially "more reliable ways of gaining access to new ideas, information and skills" and that linking social capital is more likely to be "associated with exposure to a multiplicity of information and knowledge".

According to Gwynne (2005), *'residence in neighbourhoods characterized by strong social organization may increase the likelihood of interaction with adults outside the family who can provide valuable encouragement and information about post-secondary educational opportunities. It is also possible that residence in these neighbourhoods may be more likely to stimulate the activation of cultural capital within the home, thereby supporting and enhancing access to family-based knowledge useful in the pursuit of (post-secondary destinations)'*.

Local community organisations are usually maintained by local volunteers and youth workers, who normally live in the local community. This local credibility can create opportunities for enhanced safety for young people through the exercise of reciprocal sanctions which can operate to curb anti-social behaviour. Where youth workers or adult educators can foster links beyond the immediate neighbourhood, these links can also provide opportunities for employment and further education.

4. Methodology

In the study of transitions between primary and secondary schools, which involved 23 students in one primary school class, the methods of data collection included a classroom activity mapping friendship networks, interviews with 12 selected young people, interviews with the teacher and head teacher, a questionnaire for parents and the collection of school attainment data. With the exception of the teacher interviews, data collection was repeated near the end of their first year of secondary education.

The case study undertaken in a community youth club in an area of social deprivation, involved young people aged 12 to 14. As participant observers, the researchers observed their social networks and learnt about their family and school experiences which were recorded in field notes. The adult volunteers and youth workers were interviewed and the young people were interviewed in pairs. The draft findings were shared with the young people and the volunteers in separate focus group settings to confirm and elaborate on the findings. The situated knowledge of one of the researchers who had been a lifelong resident in the area was utilised to interpret meaning in context.

In the third case study early school leavers not in employment or further education were interviewed in a community facility where they were attending a 12 week programme aimed at helping them to re-engage with positive destinations. Seven of the eleven people in the programme agreed to participate and were followed for up to 18 months. The principal method employed in the case study was the collection of life histories using a staged-interview process with the participants. Given the low oral and written literacy levels of the participants, the methods used included the mapping exercise and the completion of score sheets and cards. These methods were combined with interviews to assess perceptions of the course and their emotional well-being. Again, participant observation was an important source of evidence. In addition, interviews and focus groups were also undertaken with the centre staff, the main stakeholders (programme administrators and external providers) and two of the young people's parents.

Strengths and Limitations of the methodologies

Advantages of a case study conducted over an extended period of time can include the amount of information that can be gathered from participants and stakeholders, and the opportunities to verify the trustworthiness of the information. This can allow insights into what is considered ‘common knowledge’ and to determine what actually occurs in practice.

One limitation that follows from an intensive study is that the case study site is one of many, each of which has a distinct history, peculiarities of place and of personalities, and distinct neighbourhood characteristics. To draw any generalisations it is necessary to draw upon wider knowledge of service provision. However, by observing common elements across the three case studies evidence can be strengthened.

Although the studies were conducted over a period of up to eighteen months, this is still short term compared to the time that young people take to make their transitions into secondary school and beyond to post school options. While we combined prospective and retrospective views to identify the possible effects of social capital across the age range from 12 to 17, a study conducted over a far longer period would be needed to consolidate the understandings we have developed about how young people move into employment or further education.

5. Findings and discussion

For the purposes of this paper there were two important findings from the primary to secondary transition study. The first was that young people with weak networks in the last year of primary school had even weaker networks of support at the end of the first year of secondary school. In this context it was particularly telling that while all twenty-three young people in primary school identified an adult working in the school as a ‘friend I can trust’, none of them identified an adult in the secondary school in their networks at the end of their first year of secondary school. While there was substantial disruption of networks for all young people, these losses were most pronounced for those with the weakest social capital in primary school. The second finding of relevance was that the links that survived the transition to secondary school were those with people with whom they had substantive out of school connections,

primarily through their immediate neighbourhood. The significance of this finding will become evident when the results from the other two case studies are considered.

In the youth club context we observed many interconnected relationships between families, people in their neighbourhood, youth club participants, and school friends. In primary schools, most young people come from the immediate neighbourhood and consequently their friends at school include people who they see out of school every day. This can lead to the formation of close and long standing friendships that often include siblings and the parents of their friends. However, those who lack strong family and community networks can have their school-based social capital disrupted by the move into secondary school. The young people reported that their school-based friendships changed as they moved on into secondary school, but their friendships in their immediate neighbourhood often endure.

Young people's prospects for post school education and employment are in the main not informed by what happens in schools, but from the expectations they develop from their home and by sharing among their peers. All the young people in the youth club had formed ideas about their careers and most were able to identify a family or neighbourhood member from whom they had drawn inspiration for their nominated interest. Thus bridging social capital derived from their family social capital was a primary source of information. For instance, one explained her career goal as follows:

M:what do think you would like to do when you leave school?

K: Be a vet.

M: Be a vet, oh fabulous! And do you think you need to go to college or anything for that?

K: Yeah, you need to spend....its five years or something like that, cause my mum...my dad's friend....his girlfriend and she's a trained vet.

Another example was as follows:

R: How long since you wanted to be a mechanic?

K: From I was wee. Cause I like motors.

R: Is there anyone else in your family who's a mechanic?

K: My big brother. He wanted to be a football player but he didn't get it so, he wanted to be a mechanic and he got it.

Football (soccer) is an abiding passion for many young men in Scotland and the opportunity to be selected for a development team is a much sort after achievement. This can sweep aside other aspirations and can have a negative impact on young men's development if either they are unsuccessful in their initial trials, and potentially even more of an effect if they are subsequently unable to progress to the more advanced levels. We noted an example from one young man who has made a development squad.

R: *you said you got a contract? What's that constitute? What does that mean?*

D: *I play for the team for a year and then get a new contract if I do well.*

R: *Okay. And do you get your strip for example? Do you get your training gear?*

D: *No, they keep it. You get training gear but they keep the strip.*

R: *Yeah and they clean that up each week for you?*

D: *Aye.*

R: *Do they pay for the travel costs to go?*

D: *No.*

R: *Do you get any other help from the club?*

D: *Sometimes they put a bus on if we're going to Inverness or something.*

Even when parents cannot provide a direct link into the career of choice, supportive family social capital can sustain an interest and, in time, may be used to encourage links with, for instance, the practitioners that the family access for services. We noted three young people who identified medicine as a preferred career, suggesting that some at least might not realise their hopes. Thus football aspirations are not the only career choice where reality may require a rethink. The following is one example where the young person sounds quite determined on medicine as a career choice.

T: *I would like to be a surgeon. And I know it does really...that would require college and university and a lot of really hard work.*

M: *And why do you think you would like to be surgeon?*

T: *I don't know, when I was five, I just had.....started wanting to be a doctor. I must have watched a show or something and ever since I was five, I've been telling my mum and dad I wanted to be a doctor.*

This young person went on to describe how her mum had discussed her aspirations with their local medical practitioner who had offered to give her a work experience placement. Our conclusion is that for teachers and school guidance staff in schools to play a more effective role in expanding and developing aspirations for employment and further education, they need to better inter-connect with the primary sources of advice for young people that are in their home and in their neighbourhood.

The lack of support from home and from school and other agencies for the early school leavers provided a stark contrast with the experiences of those in the youth club. The Scottish Executive (2005) literature review of the NEET group reported that young people in this category have weak family networks. We found evidence that although their family networks lacked bridging social capital that could enable connections to employment and further education, there was evidence of strong bonding social capital. Sometimes this was to the detriment of the young person as it inhibited the development of other social capital resources. In some cases a strong relationship with one parent was a significant (and sometimes the only) source of support. This is perhaps not a surprise, in light of evidence that poor and unemployed people spend more time in kinship networks than do others (Ozga and Catts, 2004).

In one case, the bonding between mother and daughter was to the exclusion of others.

Interviewee

'no, 'cause there's only my Aunt and Uncle and my grandma and I hate them'.

When asked if there was anyone else (not in the family), the respondent said resolutely 'no'. The bonding social capital was therefore exclusively with her mother who was on sickness benefits and appeared to have no close friends. Another of the participants, a male, reported that he had a strong dislike for his father (also on sickness benefits) and his siblings. However, when two family members were interviewed they expressed strong support for the young person. Most of the young people described strong relationships with members of their immediate family, even in the case cited above where negative feelings were expressed. Hence there was evidence of bonded social capital with one or a few immediate family members.

Female respondents reported demands on their time to care for their parents or for young children in their extended family, and it appeared that their families expected these caring roles to take precedence over attendance on the course.

There were very few opportunities within most of the families for linking or bridging social capital. Family demands and loyalty or responsibility often restricted social capital movement. The lack of prior success of this group in the labour market is due, in part, to social capital being restricted to family and family contacts. These links are limiting because few if any family members are employed.

A strong sense of duty was evident in the girls' descriptions of their home life. Two girls described a strong bond with one of their parents and referred to 'looking after' them. One of these girls described her mum as the only friend she had and her description of other family members suggested that there had been conflict in the past; that she and her mum were somehow separate from the rest of the family. The other female participant with close family ties was the second youngest of five girls, but according to her dad, was unlike the others (and more like him) in that she liked to stay at home. Consequently, she had become the main carer of her sisters' children when they were in casual work, shopping or in ill health. One of the boys also appeared to have a supportive family network, though he often didn't recognise this himself, perhaps because he still appeared to be affected by his parents splitting up. Poor relationships with parents and extended family were apparent for the third girl in the case study. She described having lots of 'dads' but only one (biological father) she viewed favourably. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she did not get on well with her mum, who she was living with when the course commenced. She appeared to welcome wholeheartedly the relationships she was developing with her boyfriend's family and her sense of commitment to them was clearly very strong in spite of difficulties she was having controlling his drugs and alcohol usage.

Links with peers are also rare and several had found themselves bullied and victimised while at school. One participant described her former school friends as '*two-faced*', and didn't seem to want to talk about them, while another described how his former friends had dared him to set light to his hair. He went back to visit these friends once during the programme, 'got wasted' on drugs and alcohol, and reported

he would '*not do that again – they're not really friends*'. Both these people reported that they had been asked by the school authorities to leave school before reaching leaving age and could not identify any social contacts outwith their immediate family.

The course they were undertaking when we met them did not provide opportunities for work experience through which the young people could demonstrate their abilities/enthusiasm, and hence no opportunities for bridging social capital were available with people who might offer chances for employment. The reason for this lack of opportunity for work experience was explained by the provider as being because these young people were not ready for work. Overall, the various parties involved with the young people seemed to have set low expectations which were evidenced in the limited challenges and opportunities provided. Not all the participants were ready to take up work experience opportunities, but several would have made a substantial effort if given the chance and incentive. At least two have subsequently enrolled in new courses or gained part-time work, indicating that some at least were up for the challenge. In each case, a 'Key Worker' was instrumental in creating the pathway and linkages that has led to success. Had others seen opportunities for bridging social capital created as rewards to those who made the effort to become effective contributors, at least some of the remaining participants might have seen the possibilities and responded.

Those participants without an assigned Key Worker were less likely to locate, take up, or sustain a further initiative. We conclude that interventions like the *Get Ready for Work* programme can make a significant difference to particular individuals but, as Cummings and Dyson (2004) point out, there is a need for all agencies to work at making genuinely joined-up policy work in practice. In Scotland, the role of Key Worker seems likely to be important in helping provide the connections between agencies needed for early school leavers to build on experiences gained in a *Get Ready for Work* programme, and to access more choices and more chances.

Changing habits represents a challenge for young people who have had no involvement in education or employment since leaving school, and no source of income for up to twelve months. In most cases their lifestyle appeared chaotic and not conducive to taking advantage of opportunities. Three of four males had spent

countless hours playing computer games and regularly stayed up late as they pursued higher levels of proficiency. It means that getting to a course by ten in the morning is the equivalent of people with regular sleep patterns being expected to arrive at work at five in the morning. One male described his efforts at getting up on time as follows:

Interviewee

We get...I get woke up in the morning, just...em... get woke up in the morning, but sometimes I can't do it. If I don't wake up.

Interviewer

(family member) will wake you up sometimes, yeah. And you get time for breakfast before you come in?

Interviewee

Just come in?

All the young people interviewed reported that they wanted 'to get a job', but they had no specific concept of how to translate their desire for work into a plan of action. Most had either no idea at all, or at best only vague ideas about career choice. For instance, near the end of the course, when asked about his plans one participant said,

Interviewee

Eh...probably, look for a job first or something.

Interviewer

Probably looking for a job? Okay, have you got any particular...

Interviewee

Anything.

Interviewer

Anything? Has anything come up at all that you think you could follow up?

Interviewee

No. Anything, anything...I'll get a job. I can get a job by...anything, as long as I get paid.

Both the strength of desire for a job, and the lack of any notion of how to go about achieving this goal were evident in most of the exit interviews. However, two of those on the course had a clear direction including one who had a job arranged when

the course started and seemed to be using the course as a way of earning an allowance for two weeks before the job commenced. Another had a promise of a traineeship at the end of the twelve weeks if he was able to prove he could be a regular attendee, but early in the twelve week programme he had to appear on several occasions before the courts. While a staff member from the funding provider was aware of this situation, the provider was not informed and the young person was asked to leave the course when the issue came to light.

There were two families where there was some access to links with employment or further education and while this had provided access, this did not enhance outcomes. The parent of one female participant reported:

'Her uncle works for the [college]. So he works down there and he's been there for years, so he was going to try to get her in as well but...the courses sometimes on it aren't suitable.'

This female participant had secured places on two college courses. The first was a link through school and the second was through the link with her uncle. Neither had been suitable and her dad (above) is drawing attention to the importance of supporting young people to find something that is appropriate or desired rather than forcing them to accept anything. In the other case, a male respondent had attended and completed an introductory vocational course, but then dropped out of college part way through a second course when his brother, who had been sectioned for six months under the mental health act, returned home to share the bedroom and stayed up all night. It was evident that he cared for his brother's well being but he had been unable to sleep.

All participants (except the male participant who had a small baby) were living in single parent homes either alone or with siblings; mother or father had left the family home some years ago. Two girls were living with their mother and one with their father, while two of the boys were living with mum and one with dad. In most cases, it was clear that there had been conflict and that the past had been traumatic; so much so that some participants did not mention the departed parent at all and did not provide any explanation for why they did not see them anymore. Sympathy for what

the other parent had been through was also apparent, suggesting that they had also experienced difficulties coping.

Perhaps the most important finding relates to the paucity or even complete absence of people in their lives that they would call 'friends'. All of the girls claimed that they had a boyfriend but the boys, with the exception of one who was in a long-term relationship and had just become a father, did not mention any girlfriends. One in particular aspired to have a girl friend and claimed relationships which appeared to be imaginary. The absence of age peers is undoubtedly linked to leaving school early and is exacerbated by their inclination to spend time at home with their immediate family. Although participants found it difficult to pinpoint how the course had helped them improve their 'skills', four of the six described the social impact of the course as its most positive feature.

6. Conclusions

Social capital is an important construct to consider in understanding access to further education and employment for young people. It appears that those with weak social capital when they leave primary school find themselves at a disadvantage in forming friendships and accessing networks in the greater complexity of secondary schools. It appears also that their family and bridging social capital accessed through their family networks are the primary influence on the formation of aspirations, and in providing access to employment and further education. When the family social capital resources are limited due to a lack of involvement of family members in employment, the opportunities for young people to secure successful outcomes in the transition from school depends on the presence of key workers who can link them up with services across a range of agencies. Long term unemployed youth can be reconnected and can access further education and training if such support is provided, and if community centres provide a safe environment in which to enable this process to commence.

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