Social Capital and Whole System Educational Change: Deepening Learning in Ontario School Districts

Over the past decade, a small body of education research is emerging that focuses on the role of social capital in school effectiveness and improvement. This research is demonstrating the importance of social capital to student achievement (Coleman, 1988; Pil & Leana, 2009). It is also developing our understanding of collaboration and its contribution to effective learning environments (Papay & Kraft, 2017; Moolenaar, 2012) as well as school leadership (Daly, 2010) and knowledge exchange (author, 2016). Although social capital is recognized as an important element of the professional capital required for system reform (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), it is largely missing as a focus in its own right in the educational change literature. This paper presents findings from a two year qualitative study of six school districts in Ontario who are engaged in the difficult work of developing a culture of deep learning in their schools. To date, whole systems change research in education has focused on the structural and human capital dimensions of school reform at the expense of examining the social side of change (Quintero, 2017). The findings from this study begin to unpack the specific role of social capital in system improvement, emphasizing the ways in which school district leaders are leveraging social capital strategies to cultivate the collaborative cultures necessary for whole system change (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

This research uses a multiple case study design (Yin, 2013). Each case represents one Ontario school district whose district improvement plan includes a focus on deep learning. In each case, we interviewed the district’s senior leadership team, school administrators, central office personnel, and teachers. We also interviewed students and parents when available. We report the findings from interviews with school and district administrators in this paper, focusing specifically on the ways in which social capital contributes to developing a culture of deep learning in their school board. We are taking a holistic coding approach to analyzing the data (Saldaña, 2015), focusing on identifying key issues and recurrent themes that are emerging within each case and across the cases as well.

Preliminary findings from this research suggest that the school districts who are intentionally incorporating professional learning opportunities that are designed to develop connections among and between educators within and between schools are experiencing greater success with their deep learning agenda. Importantly, these strategies are building trust and relationships between teachers, district and school administrators, and central office personnel (e.g., instructional coaches), which are weakening the influence of the formal organizational hierarchy and cultivating a robust social network that supports organizational learning and creates spaces for innovation district-wide. A networked learning approach is a key feature of this work where district administrators are recognizing and capitalizing on the knowledge and expertise of educators within the system. They are providing the space, time, and resources necessary for educators to work collaboratively and co-construct knowledge in service of deepening learning not only for their students, but also for the adults within the system as well.

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References

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