benevolent SOCIETY

Social capital among school students in disadvantaged communities

Social exclusion and poverty in Australia are becoming more geographically concentrated, with entrenched intergenerational disadvantage in a number of communities. Governments and non-government organisations in Australia and internationally have begun to adopt a more coordinated and sustained approach to addressing disadvantage at the community level. This involves strengthening social networks and local capacity for change, that is, building social capital.

Researchers and policy-makers are divided about whether social capital can be measured and, if so, how to do so. In response, The Benevolent Society and the University of Western Sydney carried out research in schools in two disadvantaged communities in New South Wales to develop a multi-dimensional measure of social capital and to explore the relationships between social capital and a range of outcomes for young people.

Key Points

- Social capital is an important factor in building strong and healthy communities and has a significant impact on social and economic outcomes.

- Social capital can be viewed as a resource in communities comprised of social networks of mutual support, trust and reciprocity.

- This research, conducted in two disadvantaged communities, found that school students with higher levels of social capital tended to show better mental and physical health, academic self-concept, sense of belonging in the school and community and lower levels of perceived discrimination.

- Interviews with participants revealed strong relationships between students and school staff, strong family ties and feelings of security in their community. However, there were also concerns about bullying and anti-social behaviour, drug and alcohol consumption amongst young people, and a lack of funds for schools to provide better quality facilities and more programs.

BACKGROUND

Research has shown that social exclusion and poverty in Australia are becoming more geographically concentrated, with entrenched intergenerational disadvantage in a number of communities. Governments and non-government organisations in Australia and internationally have begun to adopt a more coordinated and sustainable approach to addressing disadvantage at the community level, by strengthening social networks and local capacity for change, that is, building social capital.

Social capital is a vital component of resilient communities as it allows people to interact in a cooperative and organised way to achieve shared goals, and to provide support and guidance to one another (Stone & Hughes, 2002). Social capital is defined as "networks of trust and reciprocity that link multiple individuals together" (Leigh, 2010) and has been shown to facilitate a range of positive outcomes for individuals and communities (ABS, 2002; Edwards & Bromfield, 2010; Vinson, 2007).

Previous attempts to measure social capital in communities have been fairly limited in their scope, with opinions of researchers and policy-makers divided about whether social capital can be measured and if so, how to do so. Few studies have succeeded in developing detailed and stable measures of social capital.

THE AIMS

In response, The Benevolent Society and the University of Western Sydney carried out research in schools in two disadvantaged communities in New South Wales (NSW). The main aims of this research were to:

- develop a valid and reliable tool to measure social capital

- investigate the relationships between social capital and a variety of outcomes for young people

- assess the needs and strengths of the two target communities to inform future programs/interventions.

METHODOLOGY

The research was undertaken in two primary schools and four high schools in two communities in South West Sydney and the Central Coast of NSW.

The first community was considered to be experiencing high levels of social disadvantage. The majority of residents came from a non-English speaking background (NESB) and were employed in low paying jobs. The second community was more economically disadvantaged with high levels of long-term unemployment, low educational attainment and a high incidence of mental illness and anti-social behaviour.

The initial phase of the project focused on developing a survey to measure social capital. An extensive review of the social science literature and existing surveys was undertaken and a draft instrument was created and tested on a sample of 485 high school students.

The results were analysed and the survey refined and reduced to produce a final scale of 29 items measuring six aspects of social capital (trust and reciprocity among family, friends, neighbours, community and institutions), and two factors capturing a sense of belonging in their community and isolation. The final scale was re-tested on 1,216 students in two primary schools and three high schools. The analyses showed that the instrument was both reliable and valid.

The survey also collected information on students' demographics, academic self-concept, mental and physical health and wellbeing. The relations between this information and the social capital scale data was analysed to identify any differences in levels of social capital between sub-groups of students (e.g. grade or gender differences), and associations between aspects of social capital and outcomes for young people.

An assessment of the needs and strengths of the two target communities was conducted through interviews and focus groups with school staff, students, parents and community residents.

THE FINDINGS

Social capital and outcomes for young people

Students reported high levels of social capital (trust and reciprocity) overall, with family and friends' social capital generally rated higher than neighbours', community and institutional social capital. There were some gender differences; for example, female primary school students reported higher levels of reciprocity with their community and institutions compared to males. Female high school students reported lower levels of family trust and reciprocity, yet higher levels of friends' trust and reciprocity compared to males.

The analyses between measures of social capital and outcomes indicated that higher levels of social capital were associated with better mental and physical health, academic self-concept (how they see themselves performing academically), sense of belonging in the school and community, and reduced perceived discrimination. These findings provide further reinforcement that social capital is a protective factor, and that both close and distant social networks (i.e. from family to the wider community) all play an important part.

Views about schools and communities

The interviews with school staff, students, parents and community residents revealed both positive and negative aspects in the communities. For example, participants sometimes reported strong relations between students and school staff, particularly where students felt that their principal or teachers really listened to and understood them. Participants reported strong family ties within the community and feeling secure in their communities.

The principal is pretty fair here. He'll give you a chance if he thinks that you deserve one. He'll help you out if he knows you're in a tight position. Or if there's something you've got to tell somebody, he's a good person for that too. Like if you've got problems and stuff, if you tell him, he understands.

[when asked about reciprocity among neighbours] most of the people there help me … when I fall down off my scooter or if I fall off my bike. Or if I lose something like money. All of my sisters lose anything like a purse, some people help.

However, there were also concerns expressed about the level of bullying and antisocial behaviours both within and outside the schools, although all participating schools felt that the problems were lessening over time. Health concerns were voiced, particularly in relation to drug taking and alcohol consumption among young people. Interviews also revealed that the communities were quite insular with residents preferring to stay within community boundaries as that was where they felt most comfortable (particularly for the NESB residents).

Our school had a bad image of kids causing trouble, fights, fires, all of that.

And like it starts out with like one … and then it's just like they do it every day after that. They just get hooked into this sort of … They get into like a lifestyle like go to parties, then they drink, then they do drugs and they just grow up with it.

School staff and students reported that schools lacked, or had poor quality facilities. Funding problems also prevented schools from engaging in many of the programs that are common in more affluent areas such as running homework centres and providing extra-curricular activities (e.g. excursions, camps and guest speakers).

NEXT STEPS

The Benevolent Society and University of Western Sydney are continuing their social capital research in high schools, through a three year project funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant.

This project will measure the level of social capital and a range of outcomes among students in six high schools in South West Sydney and the Central Coast. It will also deliver school-based interventions aimed at building social capital by fostering social networks and partnerships in the schools and wider community. The impact on social capital and other psychological, educational and health outcomes will be assessed.

This research forms part of The Benevolent Society's *Growing Communities Together* initiative, a long-term approach to strengthening disadvantaged communities.

Growing Communities Together

The Benevolent Society has committed to a long-term initiative to strengthening disadvantaged communities, called *Growing Communities Together*. This initiative aims to make communities stronger and more resilient by increasing social support networks, community connections and involvement in community organisations and decision-making. Read more about *Growing Communities Together* at *www.tastetours.org.au*

Acknowledgments

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We help people change their lives through support and education, and we speak out for a just society where everyone thrives. We're Australia's first charity. We're a not-for-profit and non-religious organisation and we've helped people, families and communities achieve positive change for 200 years.

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