

Social capital and student learning: Empirical results from Latin American primary schools

Joan B. Anderson*

School of Business Administration, University of San Diego, 5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110, USA

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Abstract

This paper presents an empirical analysis of the relationship between social capital and student math and language achievement and the probability of promotion, using data gathered from fourth grade classrooms in public schools in four Latin American cities. The results suggest that social capital among teachers in a school, between teacher and students, and among the students in a classroom contribute significantly to learning achievement and the probability of promotion. Furthermore, social capital between the students matters at least as much as the teacher's social capital. Children learn from each other and the networks allowing that to happen can be very important. The current pressure on teachers to achieve results on reading and math scores has tended to push teachers to "teach to the test". Ironically, this study's results indicate that spending time in creating social capital within the classroom environment is associated with higher language and math test scores.

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1. Introduction

Economists define a capital good as a good whose value is derived from producing other goods. Social capital refers to the investment in relationships, active connections and/or social networks that result in increased productivity. While physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital to properties of individuals, social capital involves mechanisms through which knowledge can be transferred from one person to another. It consists of a set of social interaction assets such as shared

norms and values, trust, honesty, mutual understanding, tolerance, cooperation, collaboration and reciprocity that enable people to work with each other. Where people are trusting and trustworthy and are actively interacting with others in their communities, costs of business and social transactions are less and the transmission of knowledge from one person to another is facilitated. It acts as a sociological WD-40 for information diffusion (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). Social capital is viewed as an intangible asset that belongs to the community rather than the individual. Its level is a function of the quality of relationships, attitudes and discipline between the individual parties that form a group. If social capital is low, the extent to which human

*Tel.: +1 619 260 4857; fax: +1 619 260 4891.

E-mail address: joana@sandiego.edu

capital can be mobilized is limited (Hargreaves, 2001). A betrayal of trust undermines and/or destroys social capital.

Beginning in the 1980s, a literature on social capital and its role in education began to emerge (Bourdieu, 1986; Carbonaro, 1998; Coleman, 1988; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Horvat, Weininger, & Largeau, 2003; Putnam, 2000, among many others). Instilling concepts of respect, trustworthiness, honesty and empathy into group relationships along with conflict resolution and problem solving skills, learning to say thank you and give complements as well as to express misgivings and anger are all part of the development of social capital between children in the classroom. Some studies have shown that the effects of developing social capital within the classroom, for example use of cooperative learning techniques such as “Kagan Structures” (Kagan, 1989–1990) and the “Tribes Learning Community” (Gibbs, 1995) are related to learning.

The purpose of this paper is to extend the current literature by focusing on social capital within the classroom and within Latin America. It empirically tests the contention that more social capital is associated with more learning by statistically estimating the effects of social capital within the classroom on learning achievement and the probability of promotion, using data from fourth grade children in four large Latin American cities: Buenos Aires, Argentina; Belo Horizonte, Brazil; Santiago, Chile and Leon, Mexico.¹

2. Methodology

This study empirically addresses the following three research questions: (1) within the context of Latin American schools where more traditional stand and deliver (in contrast to constructivist) teaching techniques predominate, does the level of social capital within the classroom matter for student learning? (2) How important is social capital between students and their classmates relative to between students and the teacher for increasing learning? (3) Is social capital equally effective in poor and non-poor classrooms or is there a difference in how social capital affects learning between them?

¹For a more detailed discussion of the literature on social capital in education see Appendix A to this paper, posted on the web at <http://home.sandiego.edu/~joana/publications/SOCIAL%20CAPITAL%20AND%20education%20Appendix%201.pdf>.

To answer these questions underlying social forces (social capital) are quantified with the use of proxy variables. Grootaert and van Bastelaer (2001) in their World Bank survey of social capital research conclude that using proxy variables to measure social capital does not detract from the validity of the exercise, especially since there has not yet been much empirical work on social capital in the classroom context. The challenge is to continue testing proxy measures in empirical work in order to build a case for their applicability. The social capital proxy variables in my study attempt to measure the effects of social capital flows between teachers and students, among classmates and between teachers and parents, the school principal and among teachers in the school on the child’s learning.

2.1. The data

Empirical estimates of the cross-city effects of social capital within the classroom on language and math achievement and on the likelihood of promotion are based on data that were gathered in 1999, using stratified random sampling techniques. The data include approximately 20 fourth grade students per classroom, one classroom per school, in 96 schools, 24 in each of the four Latin American cities, a sample of 2048 students in all. The data for this study were gathered as part of a larger project that involved research teams from four prominent Latin American institutions.² Four questionnaires were developed and administered to (1) the parents of the 2048 children; (2) the teachers of these children; (3) their school principals/administrators and (4) researcher observation of the 96 classrooms.³

To address the question of whether social capital in poor neighborhoods has the same impact as when applied in non-poor neighborhoods, the sampling was stratified with half of the sample drawn from poor and half from non-poor neighborhood schools. In three of the countries, Argentina, Brazil and Chile, human development indices (constructed

²The team leaders and institutions are: Guillermina, Tiramonti, director, FLACSO, Buenos Aires; Dra. Ligia de Oliveira Barbosa Fundacao Joao Pinheiro, Minas Gerais and Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro Brazil; Marcela LaTorre, CIDE, Santiago; and Raquel Ahuja Sanchez, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico, DF, as well as two US co-directors Dr. Laura Randall, City University of New York and myself, University of San Diego.

³More details on the data collection and on the four school districts involved can be found in Anderson (2005).

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