



## The emergence of social capital in low-income Latino elementary schools



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### ABSTRACT

Scholars suggest that racial/ethnic and class disparities in school-based social capital contribute to educational inequalities. Previous studies demonstrate that social capital (relations of trust, mutual expectations, and shared values) between parents and schools supports children's development. Yet we know little about the emergence of social capital, that is, the processes through which it develops. In this study, we explore mechanisms of social capital emergence in predominantly low-income Latino school communities. We draw data from an experimental study that manipulated social capital through an after-school family engagement program. Based on interviews and focus groups with participating parents, teachers, and program staff in two elementary schools, we identified four types of interactions that act as mechanisms of social capital emergence: (1) responsive communication; (2) reciprocal communication; (3) shared experiences; and (4) institutional linkage. The article connects these mechanisms to theoretically linked sources of social capital and discusses implications for theory and practice.

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### Introduction

Community engagement and interaction with key social institutions shape family functioning and individual outcomes in important ways (Mancini, Bowen, & Martin, 2005). A growing body of research suggests that social capital among parents and between parents and teachers supports children's educational development (Dika & Singh, 2002). By social capital, we mean relations of trust, mutual expectations, and shared values (Coleman, 1988; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999). Such relations have value for individuals because they provide an avenue for information exchange and facilitate the establishment and enforcement of social norms (Coleman, 1988, 1990). Social capital between families and schools may be particularly consequential for children's development because it bridges two main social contexts in which children learn and grow (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Although the concept of social capital has been widely used in social science research, less attention has been paid to how it

develops. It is important to gain insight into this process because it may be implicated in educational inequality (Bourdieu, 1986; Kao, 2004). Minority students and those with fewer socioeconomic resources, who tend to be disadvantaged in academic contexts, are also more likely to face barriers to building strong school-based relationships (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011). Whereas the networks of White and middle-class families tend to include more professionals and experts, Latino and working-class or poor families typically have stronger familial ties but are more isolated from schools (Gamoran, Turley, Turner, & Fish, 2012). Hence, we know that social capital varies across social class and racial/ethnic groups, but the process of social capital emergence that may explain this variation remains an unopened black box.

This paper provides an important first step toward better understanding social capital emergence. To do this, we analyze data from an experimental study of an after-school program designed to build relationships in the school community. We explore how participants developed relationships in the program, and how this relationship development connects to extant theory on social capital emergence. Our data come from focus groups and interviews with parents, teachers, and program staff in two predominantly low-income Latino elementary schools.

We find evidence of four types of social interactions through which social capital emerges: responsive communication, reciprocal communication, shared experiences, and institutional linkage. These constitute the mechanisms that gave rise to social capital

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within the context of the after-school program and the targeted schools. As such, our findings not only inform our understanding of social capital more broadly, but also specifically how schools can structure interactions among parents and between parents and schools to facilitate trust, mutual expectations, and shared values in communities where school-based social capital tends to be weak.

#### *What is social capital?*

Researchers across the social sciences have employed the concept of social capital to understand and examine a variety of social phenomena; however, its definition remains actively debated. Both Coleman (1988, 1990) and Bourdieu (1986) define social capital in terms of the resources it provides. For Coleman, “social capital is defined by its function” in that it encompasses aspects of social networks that aid individual action by providing access to otherwise unattainable resources (1988, p. 98). He also proposes three main forms: levels of trust, as evidenced by mutual obligations and shared expectations; information channels; and norms and effective sanctions that promote the common good. Bourdieu (1986) similarly describes social capital as “the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 248).

To understand and empirically examine its development, it is necessary to conceptually distinguish social capital from its causes and effects (Durlauf, 1999; Portes, 1998). Thus, rather than defining the concept in terms of its function, as Coleman does, we focus on “the resource potential of personal and organizational networks” (Sampson et al., 1999, p. 635). We view social capital not as an individual characteristic but as a property of networks, a collection of relational qualities, through which individuals can access resources (Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000; Carbonaro, 1999; Sampson, 1999). We expect that trusting relationships characterized by shared beliefs and expectations facilitate feelings of social belonging, information sharing, and the enforcement of common norms (Coleman, 1988, 1990). Therefore, we agree that levels of trust, mutual expectations, and shared values in a network are indicators of social capital (Coleman, 1988), but we contend that information channels and effective norms are two of its potential effects. Thus, we define social capital as trust, mutual expectations, and shared values embedded in social networks, as these are the relational qualities that influence the ability with which individuals can access resources through their social connections.

Although we believe that social capital can benefit families, we recognize that it is neither inherently good nor bad because the content and use of resources accessed through it will vary across contexts (Sampson et al., 1999). Even when social capital promotes desirable outcomes in children, its social functions are complex if not conflicting. On the one hand, relations of trust, mutual expectations, and shared values can serve as a public good by increasing access to childrearing resources like information, assistance, social support, and consistent norms in a community (Coleman, 1990; Sampson, 1999). Yet the opportunity and ability to build such relations also differs systematically across families as a function of social background (Lin, 2000). Bourdieu (1986) goes so far as to label social capital a form of symbolic power wielded by the dominant class to maintain advantage and reproduce social inequalities. Hence, while social capital has the potential to serve as a resource for all parents, the processes through which it typically develops likely exacerbate social inequalities among families.

#### *Social capital in educational context*

Measures of school-based social capital have been positively linked to various academic outcomes, including children's

attitudes and behaviors, achievement, and attainment (Dika & Singh, 2002; Woolley & Bowen, 2007; Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009). These effects manifest through various mechanisms. For example, greater connectivity between parents and school staff promotes mutual awareness of children's needs, provides an avenue for parents to advocate for their children, and may encourage teachers to amplify their efforts with particular students (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007). In addition, families with strong school-based parent networks can draw on these relationships as a resource for addressing day-to-day challenges associated with child development and educational success (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003).

Contemporary scholars argue that social capital holds promise for understanding educational inequality, in particular when attention is given to “issues of power and domination” in interactions between individuals and institutions (Dika & Singh, 2002, pp. 45–46; Noguera, 2004). The unequal distribution of school-based social capital by race/ethnicity and social class reflects patterns of inequality in academic outcomes (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Kao, 2004; Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Limited access to school-based social capital may perpetuate Latino educational disadvantage (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011). When Latino children's academic resources include social support from parents, teachers, and peers, they tend to exhibit higher levels of school engagement, academically-oriented behaviors, and positive attitudes toward learning (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). Yet low-income, Latino, and immigrant parents often experience cultural dissonance and discomfort in interactions with their children's schools (Ramirez, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Consideration of both Latino families' access to social capital and the processes through which it emerges in school networks may provide much needed insight into how best to structure schooling conditions to promote achievement for this historically disadvantaged group.

#### *Theoretical insights into the emergence of social capital*

Despite a long history and continued efforts to advance social capital theory, surprisingly little attention has been paid to understanding how it develops. All theories assume that social interactions must occur in order for social capital to arise. But not all social interactions yield social capital, and the specific mechanisms through which it is created remain in doubt. Coleman characterizes the development of social capital as a “prototypical micro-to-macro transition” that occurs “under certain conditions” and through “purposive actions at the micro level” (1990, p. 244). Recent theories of social organization similarly assert that both structural features of communities and social processes shape community social capital (Mancini et al., 2005; Small, 2002, 2009). Therefore, we distinguish two elements of social capital emergence: interactional processes among members of a social network, and structural conditions that shape those interactional processes.

Structural conditions refer to the “interconnecting parts, a framework, organization, configuration, and composition” of a social network and the social context(s) in which it is embedded (Mancini et al., 2005, p. 573). Social capital accumulation is responsive to the structural characteristics of both the local network (e.g., among parents in a school) and the communities and institutions that make up the larger social context (e.g., surrounding neighborhoods, school district, state or national policy context) (Sampson, 1999; Small, 2009). Coleman's (1988, 1990) foundational theory provides examples of structural conditions he expected to facilitate its emergence but not how these actually produce social capital. For example, he argues that social capital is more likely to develop in networks that are stable over time and those

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