



The impact of social capital on self-efficacy and study success among first-year university students

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ABSTRACT

University programmes increasingly implement small-group teaching, with the assumption that students' social capital fosters academic achievement. However, few studies address the impact of social capital on the study success of first-year students. The current study addresses this research gap, examining the extent to which social capital relates to study success for first-year university students and whether this effect differs for high-, average-, and low-achieving high school students. Survey data collected from 407 first-year university students' measure social capital in terms of family, faculty, and peers. Path analysis reveals that in contrast to family capital, peer capital (help seeking, collaboration, and fellow students' support) and faculty capital (mentor support) contribute positively to study success, indirectly through friendship or self-efficacy. For high achievers, compared with low achievers, friendship has a positive effect on study success during the first year. Small-group teaching seems beneficial for study success if it enhances students' social capital.

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1. Introduction

Universities increasingly implement small-group teaching to foster interactions between students and faculty, improve study success rates, and enhance the quality of education. These efforts are required in light of increasing enrolments in most Western countries (Beerens-Soo & Vossensteyn, 2009), which have resulted in not only larger student bodies but also more diversity in terms of students' background characteristics and achievement levels. Many students are at risk for attrition; in the Netherlands for example, nearly 9% of university students dropped out in 2011, and 28.1% experienced potentially problematic delays because they switched study programmes in their first year (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, 2013, 2014). Previous studies emphasize adjustment difficulties and lack of social support as key risk factors for attrition (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004; Rausch & Hamilton, 2006).

As a potential solution, small-group teaching can help build social capital, and the associated interactions and collaboration can enhance individual performance (e.g., O'Donnell, 2006; Pai, Sears, & Maeda, 2015; Webb, 1982). Social capital refers to a person's access to valuable resources (e.g., information, advice, support) through social relations, which enables him or her to attain personal goals (Coleman, 1990a; Flap & Völker, 2004; Lin, 1999). It is similar to other forms of capital, in that it results in the achievement of certain goals that could not

otherwise be achieved (Coleman, 1988, 1990a). Social capital theory, which posits that networks of relationships support people's efforts to achieve various goals, also emphasizes the instrumental utility of investment in resources, such that people invest in relationships when they expect a valuable return (Lin, 1999). For this study, we investigate social capital among small groups of first-year university students, to expand on theoretical considerations of collaborative learning (O'Donnell, 2006) and meta-analyses of the effects of small group learning on knowledge transfer (Pai et al., 2015). In university contexts, resources might be derived from relationships with parents (family capital), friends and fellow students (peer capital), and academic staff (faculty capital), including shared information and financial, practical, and emotional support (e.g., Stack-Cutler, Parrila, Jokisaari, & Nurmi, 2015). The increasing use of small-group teaching in academic curricula in turn gives rise to the main question of our study: To what extent and how does social capital contribute to study success in the contemporary Dutch university context?

1.1. First-year students' social capital

In the school context, social capital relates positively to learning outcomes (Beaulieu, Israel, Hartless, & Dyk, 2001; Cemalcilar & Gökşen, 2014; Coleman, 1988, 1990b; Dufur, Parcel, & Troutman, 2013; Huang, 2009; Kao & Rutherford, 2007), but little is known about these effects in the university context or which dimensions of social capital contribute most to study success. Some relevant studies in this context suffer from two limitations: Either they use a specific sample of students, such as international students (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011;

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Mamiseishvili, 2012; Neri & Ville, 2008; Rienties, Héliot, & Jindal-Snape, 2013; Rienties & Nolan, 2014) or ethnically diverse student groups (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010), or they focus on only one or two dimensions of social capital, such as relationships with peers and/or staff (e.g., Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Christie et al., 2004; Rytönen, Parpala, Lindblom-Ylänne, Virtanen, & Postareff, 2012) or with peers and/or family (e.g., Cheng, Ickes, & Verhofstadt, 2012; Eggens, Van der Werf, & Bosker, 2008; Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007; Román, Cuestas, & Fenollar, 2008) or the effects of friendship (e.g., Buote et al., 2007; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) on adjustments after the transition to university. Relatively less is known about the relationship between a variety of social capital dimensions and study success in the university context (e.g., Etcheverry, Clifton, & Roberts, 2001).

Building social capital is particularly challenging during the transition from high school to university, when students may feel unsure in this new social situation. Besides meeting university requirements and adjusting to university life, they must build new social networks as they leave their high school teachers, often their parental homes, and former classmates (e.g., Clark, 2005). After this transition, fellow students, teachers, and friends may become more important than parental support, because the fellow students and professors meet more frequently, and students are physically distant from their parents if they move to a university city. For these students, building new friendships and perceived access to support from friends is important for their adjustment to university life during the first semester, more so than family support (Buote et al., 2007; Friedlander et al., 2007). In this stage of emerging adulthood, friends become the most important source of support and inform students' identity development, toward becoming young adults who are increasingly responsible for decisions and finances, independent of their parents (Arnett, 2004; Van Duijn, Zeggelink, Huisman, Stokman, & Wasseur, 2003).

1.1.1. Family capital

The importance of social capital for improving learning outcomes changes over time, depending on the learning context and the student's developmental stage. Most studies conducted in educational contexts focus on parents as a beneficial resource. Achievement generally relates positively to parent–child and parent–teacher interactions, parental education, and parent–school involvement (Cemalcilar & Gökşen, 2014; Dufur et al., 2013; Huang, 2009; Kao & Rutherford, 2007). When students enter a university, especially if they move out of their parents' homes, such that the parents are not part of the students' daily lives, this role changes, and relationships with fellow students and instructors become paramount (Arnett, 2004; Van Duijn et al., 2003). During this transition, family support may help students deal with feelings of loneliness or adapt to the new situation, but over time, friends and fellow students at the university ultimately become more important (Wilcox et al., 2005). Many students remain financially dependent on their parents or other family members though (Arnett, 2004), and when families provide financial support, students can focus more on their studies and perform consistently during their first year (Cheng et al., 2012).

Parental knowledge about academia represents another valuable resource for first-year university students. First-generation students, whose parents and siblings have not attended a higher education institution (Dumais & Ward, 2010), may be less prepared for the transition to university than other students, including a lack of specific information about what to expect from the university. However, prior studies offer mixed results, such that dropout rates are higher among first-generation than second-generation students (Ishitani, 2006; Stage & Hossler, 2000), but no evidence affirms an effect of parental education on study progress (Van den Berg & Hofman, 2005).

1.1.2. Faculty capital

Students can receive support from faculty and staff in the form of advice, information, and feedback, as well as guidance and motivation so

that students can complete challenging assignments. Research is inconclusive about the effect of interactions between student and staff on study success though. Some studies show a positive relationship of student–faculty interactions with a sense of belonging and study success (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Meeuwisse et al., 2010), but Etcheverry et al. (2001) find a positive effect only of peer relationships on achievement, not of student–faculty interactions. Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, and Pancer's (2000) investigation of the patterns of various forms of support on adjustment to university during the first semester shows that peer support increases while instructor support decreases over time. Apparently, as students get to know one another, they seek support from their fellow students rather than from faculty. Wang, Cullen, Yao, and Li (2013) find no significant effect of relationships with instructors on achievement, though they do note an effect of feedback seeking.

1.1.3. Peer capital

Interactions with and social support from fellow students or friends is important for helping students adjust to the university setting and obtain social comfort (Buote et al., 2007; Deil-Amen, 2011), engagement (Zhao & Kuh, 2004), and study success (e.g., Etcheverry et al., 2001; Kuh et al., 2008; Robbins et al., 2004), as well as for informing their decisions to withdraw (Christie et al., 2004). Teaching in small groups encourages the development of peer capital, because students discuss and exchange information with their fellow students during classes or while collaborating on assignments. Because they interact more frequently, it is easier to establish and maintain friendly relationships (Fehr, 1996; Van Duijn et al., 2003; Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). Yet the actual contribution of peer capital to study success in a small-group teaching context is equivocal. On the one hand, interactions with fellow students contribute to study success when those others possess skills and knowledge that is complementary to that possessed by the focal student, norms of striving for good results predominate in the group, and trusting relationships exist among students, because these conditions increase the focal student's motivation and well-being (Neri & Ville, 2008). On the other hand, the effects of social capital depend on the group's prevailing attitudes and norms. Informal group norms that do not value studying may interfere with study success. Collaboration also might hinder study success if working together simply reduces students' workload and effort, or it may contribute to success if the students integrate their different learning perspectives and pool their diverse skills (Flache, 2003; Karabenick & Knapp, 1991).

1.1.4. Prior achievement and self-efficacy

Social influence is an important mechanism in social capital building in small groups, but the relationship between social capital and study success during the first year may depend on the high school achievement level of incoming students. Androushchak, Poldin, and Yudkevich (2013) find a nonlinear effect of peer support on achievement. High-ability students obtained the most benefit from interacting with other high-ability fellow students, whereas low-ability students were not influenced by fellow students, nor did they affect other fellow students. Similarly, high-achieving students benefitted from peer support for their academic achievement, whereas low achieving students had difficulties approaching peers to gain support (Todres, Tsimtsiou, Sidhu, Stephenson, & Jones, 2012; Vaughan, Sanders, Crossley, O'Neill, & Wass, 2015). Students at risk of dropping out also described low quality relationships with faculty (Whannell & Whannell, 2014) and indicated they did not know whom to approach for help or dare to ask (Cleland, Arnold, & Chessier, 2005). That is, students who need instructor support the most to succeed seem to lack this form of social capital. However, Arcidiacono and Nicholson (2005) find no differences across high and low achievers in terms of benefiting from relationships with high-achieving fellow students. The question thus remains: How does the level of prior achievement interact with different dimensions of social capital to affect study success in a university context with small-

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