



School as a site of student social capital: An exploratory study from Brazil

Tamo Chattopadhyay*

Institute for Educational Initiatives, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA

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ABSTRACT

The overarching research problem guiding this study is how low-income students develop and experience access to social networks and relational resources within the context of urban education in Brazil's deeply stratified society. The study uses the concepts of social capital as a theorizing lens to examine this research problem. The findings demonstrate that school-facilitated student social capital remains an intrinsically differentiated phenomenon. In particular, access to relational contexts, capacities, and resources for students varies with their individual attributes and familial characteristics. Such a framing provides new analytical markers for integrating a social capital dimension in the discourse of educational quality.

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1. Introduction

Socialization aspects of education are widely considered as significant mechanisms of reproducing social inequalities (Apple, 1982; Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In particular, lack of access to resource-rich networks represents an important dimension of social inequality for low income adolescents since middle class adolescents are routinely provided with explicit and implicit institutional support within the social networks of their families, schools and other social organizations (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). At the same time, much of the scholarship in international educational development continues to focus on parameters of cognitive outcomes of learners such as years of schooling, graduation rates, and learning achievements. Less is studied about the social-relational outcomes of schooling in the context of low and middle-income countries.

The current paper focuses on this less explored terrain and presents findings from a case study about the relational dynamics and support systems of students in a public high school in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The overarching research problem guiding this study is how low-income students develop and experience access to social networks and relational resources within the context of urban education in Brazil's deeply stratified society. The current paper uses the concepts of social capital as a theorizing lens to examine this research problem.

It must be clarified at the outset that this paper is not aiming to evaluate a specific educational policy or analyze the discourse of school education reform in Brazil today; nor is the paper an

attempt to propose a causal model of how social capital of adolescents affects their educational outcomes. Rather, the central objective of the current study is to develop a nuanced understanding of the processes and parameters that undergird much of the relational dynamic of young people in a demonstrably under-resourced school in an unequal educational and social polity.

The scope of the paper is thus two-fold. First, the paper develops an analytical framework of students' social networks and relational endowments that is anchored in the theories of social capital and education. Second, the paper employs this conceptual framework to empirically examine the relational universe of students in the specific case of an urban public high school in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section (Section 2) situates the key theoretical issues of social capital in education, with a particular reference to the research of Brazilian scholars. This is followed by a conceptual framework of student social capital for studying young peoples' relational universe in schooling contexts (Section 3). Section 4 takes a closer look at the Brazilian educational reality, with a focus on the social context of public education in the city of Rio de Janeiro – the site of the current study. Section 5 discusses the rationale of the study's design and the research methods employed to collect and analyze empirical data. The findings from the data are presented next (Section 6). The paper concludes (Section 7) with a discussion on the study's limitations, and the implications of integrating a social capital dimension into the inquiry of education quality in international educational development.

2. Situating the discourse of social capital in education

The literature on social capital includes two major approaches to defining the concept: the functionalist normative approach and the conflict perspective. The normative view, most closely

* Correspondence address: Sandner Hall/IEI Building, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA. Mobile: +1 917 592 8373.

E-mail address: tamo.chattopadhyay@gmail.com.

associated with sociologist James Coleman, considers social capital as norms and networks whose function is in creating and sustaining a “functional community” (Coleman, 1988, 1990). The conflict view of social capital, on the other hand, is grounded in social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1973; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Apple, 1982; Carnoy and Levin, 1985) and builds upon the conceptualization of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu defined social capital as resources individuals can procure by virtue of their relationships with others, or “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985: 248). As Lareau succinctly summarizes: “In contrast to Coleman who portrays social relations as intrinsically valuable for helping children comply with dominant standards, Bourdieu critically reflects on the existence of dominant standards (or rules of the game in the field)” (Lareau, 2001: 81).

The current paper situates the construct of student social capital in Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory and is informed further by contribution of scholars who have introduced the notions of power and privilege within the social capital discourse. For example, in his significant contribution, Stanton-Salazar (1997) demonstrated the limited scope of minority adolescents’ embeddedness in school-based relationships; whereas Noguera (2001) emphatically reframed the social capital discourse from one of manifest outcome to a purposive process enacted by school-based adults in concert with parents and community.

Although social capital theory traces its roots to the education field – in the seminal contributions of Bourdieu (1985) and Coleman (1988), much of the subsequent scholarship is found in the political, economic and social development literatures (Portes, 1998). The notion of community-driven social action, articulated by political scientist Putnam (1995), remains the dominant theoretical framework of social capital in much of the international development literature.

The social capital scholarship in Brazil is reflective of this broader trend. In Brazilian scholarship, social capital is typically a construct of community engagement – associated with political participation and governance – resulting in economic development (Abramovay, 2000; Milani, 2003).

In the education literature, eminent sociologist Brandão et al. (2005) has employed Bourdieu’s theories of social capital and social reproduction to examine academic and non-academic privileges in the context of elite schooling in Brazil. There is also a vibrant discourse of social exclusion in Brazil where the constructs of ‘participation’, and ‘citizenship’ embody the concepts of social capital as community based collective action (Baquero, 2004; Rizzini et al., 2002; Rodrigues, 2003). Alongside, in the growing discourse of ‘citizenship education’ in Brazil (Ribeiro, 2002), and in Latin America as such (Cox et al., 2005) much of the theoretical underpinnings of social capital in education are prominently present:

School experiences that help students to develop skills and aptitudes that are consistent with participating in and maintaining democratic societies result from an integrated system of opportunities ... At the center of this integrated system of opportunities, at a micro level, are opportunities for social interaction and experiences between students, and between students and teachers, which present young people with opportunities to choose their short- and long-term aspirations in a congruent manner” (Cox et al., 2005: 72).

In other words, while students’ school-facilitated relational universe has not been specifically construed as social capital, much of the contemporary discourse of education and social inclusion in

Brazil can be mapped to social capital theories. By framing social capital from a student perspective, the current paper seeks to explore educational experiences and school processes in urban Brazil that enhance adolescent learners’ endowments of relational resources, critical for improving their life opportunity structures.

3. The 3R framework of student social capital

Schools are complex social fields for negotiating power and privilege. To capture the social-relational processes that young people navigate in schools in order to harness relational resources and capacities for growth, the paper presents an analytical framework of social capital that centers on the student. Such an approach not only views schools as structural sites of social capital formation of students, but also appreciates that students employ their own agency in that process. This interplay is the point of departure of the analytical framework that conceptualizes student social capital in three inter-linked domains: Relationship, Resource and Readiness, each elaborated below.

3.1. Relationship

“Relationship” embodies the networks that students build among themselves, with their educators, and with extra-familial stakeholders through school-facilitated contexts, processes and protocols. The structure and dynamics of social networks and their implications for economic opportunities and labor market outcomes for youth have long been an area of research (Granovetter, 1974; Portes, 1998; Lin, 1999; Burt, 2001; Coleman, 1990). Considerable literature also exists on the nature, meaning and impact of extra-familial relationships and peer networks during adolescence, both inside and outside of school (Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). The literature also suggests that socioeconomic and cultural differences (race, class, gender, and ethnicity) condition many aspects of adolescents’ early relationship formation processes (Giordano, 2003). These processes in turn affect the salience of low-income adolescents’ peer group interactions for achieving success along traditional middle-class paths. Notably, Stanton-Salazar’s critical contribution of “network analytic” of social capital uncovered how socio-economically disadvantaged adolescents might form social networks in ways that differ from their middle-class counterparts (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Subsequent scholarship has examined how these differences can inhibit the accumulation and transmission of important resources embedded within school-based relationships of students (Valenzuela, 1999; Ream, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). This notion of structurally differentiated social networks of adolescents in their education contexts foregrounds the construct of Relationship in the 3R model of student social capital.

3.2. Resource

In the concept of social capital, the resources of ‘others’, or the ‘second-order’ resources that are potentially available to the ‘ego’, occupy critical significance. Such resources could be material, informational, or psychosocial among others. Whether explicated as the “strength of weak ties” (Granovetter, 1974), “bridging” and “linking” social capital (Woolcock, 1998), or “structural holes” in overlapping networks (Burt, 2001), the notion of relationships formed across resource differentials emphasizes the idea that simply being in a network is not enough; it is important to be in a resource-rich network. These observations underscore the need for analytically disentangling the notions of network quantity (Relationship) from that of network quality or resource in a conceptual framework of student social capital.

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