  Handout

Developing social capital in family learning

Recent social capital theory distinguishes between 'bonding', 'bridging' and 'linking' forms of social capital (Putnam 1998; Narayan 1999; Woolcock 1998). Bonding social capital involves trust and reciprocity in closed networks (in which members of networks know other members), and helps the process of 'getting by' in life on a daily basis. 'Getting ahead' in contrast, is facilitated through 'cross-cutting ties' that take the form of either bridging or linking social capital. Bridging social capital involves overlapping networks (in which a member of one group can gain access to the resources of another group because of overlapping membership). Linking social capital involves social relations with those in authority, which might be used to garner resources or power.

In sum, these different forms of social capital can play different roles. Bonding ties with family, friends and neighbours can act as a social support safety net, whereas bridging ties with people from different networks can provide access to opportunities, and links to institutions and systems can help people and communities to gain leverage and resources. Each of these three forms of social capital is arguably essential to a strong family and strong community (Narayan 1999; Wellman and Wortley 1990; Woolcock 1998).

As well, since different types of relationships provide particular types of support, it follows that the overall balance of different forms of social capital may also be important. For example, it is argued that 'too much' bonding or inward looking social capital may undermine the development and maintenance of bridging and linking ties (Putzel 1997; Cox and Caldwell 2000).

The 'bonding', 'bridging' and 'linking' social capital framework provides a useful way for thinking about the various different types of relationships that people have at any point in their life. It also highlights the fact that different families and communities will have different 'mixes' of these types of relationships. That is, some people have strong family and friendship relationships (bonding social capital), whereas other people may be more involved in community groups (a form of bridging social capital) or know many people in various organisations and institutions (linking social capital).

**Illustration: Developing community space**

This example is about using existing structures and contacts within a community, to build family and friendship bonds, strengthen and enhance community ties, and reach people who may not usually engage with a service or program.

In this example, schools are used as key sites for engaging with the community. Community spaces within schools are used as central meeting places for people in the community, including parents and non-parents. Many different types of activities can be offered and hosted at these centres that can become community hubs. For example, play groups and other children's activities can act as a way to bring parents together. Using school based community spaces to hold training and skills development, bringing people together and at the same time enhancing skills, can lead to bonds, bridges and links.

Where families or communities are at risk, these community environments can provide a place where people can gain assistance, advice, and form support networks. The outcomes can be stronger families and communities.

**Social capital in practice**

'Bonding, bridging and linking provide us with a framework for assessing our current work and where we might change our approach in order to meet our objective of building social capital. Historically, it's probably fair to say that we've been reasonably good in the area of bonding - about strengthening the bonds with families and a close network through our services.

While the bonding component of our work remains important, we're increasingly looking to see how we can create more bridges and links for individuals, families and communities. Our assumption is that in doing so we will create more social capital and in turn more resilient individuals, families and communities. Our starting point is to use the strengths of individuals, families and communities as the basis for creating bridges and links within and across communities.

So within this social capital and community engagement framework we can begin to ask whether our work is:

* Creating trust?
* Increasing the networks enjoyed by individuals and families?
* Building opportunities for civic participation?
* Facilitating cross-institutional cooperation?'

(Hampshire and Smeaton 2001)