

Churches, Positive Social Capital, and Academic Success in Children

Sylvia D. Briscoe

Abstract—The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how and why children who experience decreased social capital and given more opportunities to attain positive social capital through participation in activities at church acquire academic success. A qualitative, explanatory, single-case study was used with purposeful sampling to select the research participants. The findings revealed comprised three major themes: Organizational Social Capital, Servant Leaders, and Positive Attitudes. The recommendations for further study include action research projects and qualitative studies to access grounded data from various standpoints including the children living the phenomena and settings other than churches.

Index Terms—academic success, social networks, social capital, social isolation.

1. DISADVANTAGED NEIGHBORHOODS AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN CHILDREN

Wilson[1] suggested that children can achieve academic success when the obstacles created from socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods have been resolved. The obstacles children residing in these disadvantaged neighborhoods experience are: lack of enthusiasm, limited educational opportunities, unreliable family situations, underemployment, increased crime, and drug and alcohol abuse [2]. He found that significant changes in the economy increased social isolation and greatly affected the children residing in inner-city America. Social isolation resulted in decreased positive social capital because of limited access to adults whose actions and way of life positively reinforce the values and norms required for academic success. Increasing the levels of positive social capital for children who reside in socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods may help to alleviate obstacles and develop the values, skills, and norms required for academic success.

2. SCHOOLS AND UNDERACHIEVING STUDENTS

Research has demonstrated that focusing on schools alone will not solve the problem. The solution also lies in comprehending how underachieving students are affected by their environments and relationships as they develop and mature. McCombs[3] shared the importance of academic investigations discovering the interpersonal connections that may alter the outlooks of isolated and underperforming students.

3. SOCIAL CAPITAL

An article entitled, “The Rural School Community Center,” was published in 1916 by Mr. Hanifan, State Supervisor of Rural Schools, Charleston, West Virginia. He wrote,

The story which follows is a concrete example of how a rural community of West Virginia in a single year actually developed social capital and then used this capital in the general improvement of its recreational, intellectual, moral and economic conditions [4].

In the first acknowledged and published use of the term social capital, it was defined as an accumulation of social interactions gained from numerous exchanges with family and community that greatly supported the individual and the group. The article did not discuss a theory, but shared practical examples around the acquisition, accumulation, and uses of social capital in the community.

Bourdieu [5] defined social capital as social networks, which may change to economic capital, and that may also be gained through holding certain positions of authority. Coleman [6] stated that social capital are the “social-structural resources” available to individuals in various forms that always have some characteristics of a social network, and resources that empower persons within the social network. It is a resource that greatly affects an individual’s capacity to improve their life conditions and achieve goals that may not have been possible without it.

Putnam [7] shared that individual and group productivity is a result of the positive social capital acquired through the positive social networks in our society. When there is lack of positive social capital in society, there is less tolerance, cultural superiority, and increased corruption. While increasing positive social

capital accelerates mutual support, cooperation, trust, and institutional proficiency. Bonding social capital create relationships that effect values and goals through individuals having a lot in common and bridging social capital create relationships that effect behavior because individuals or groups do not share the same social status. Bridging social capital is more valuable because of its positive effects on equity and diversity in our society [8] Bonding social capital often limits access to individuals outside of the immediate environment, whereas bridging social capital increases an individual's access to a variety of network with more opportunity for access to information and resources that will benefit them in the future [9]. The strong relationships resulting from bonding or bridging social capital creates mutual trust, group identification, and educational success [10]. Lin [11] summarized the many definitions of social capital by academicians in the past as an "investment in social relations with expected return in the marketplace" (p. 19).

4. CREATING AND MAINTAINING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Coleman shared three conditions needed for the creation and maintenance of social capital. They are: (1) Closure –when individuals with different characteristics coexist within social networks to promote the development of norms, and create connections where individuals expect others, within the network, to reinforce the expectancy and responsibilities of members within the network. (2) Stability – is needed predominantly within informal organizations so informal organizations should assign individuals to positions and create some form of stability. (3) Ideology - develops responsibility where individuals to act in ways that not only benefit themselves, but furthers the interest of others.

5. CHURCH AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

According to Coleman, there are six forms of social capital that may be available in an individual's life, and the church is one place where all forms are available. They are:

- 1) Responsibility and Anticipation where mutual trust is important in the transfer of social capital from one to another and individuals act out of responsibility without anticipating return for these actions.
- 2) Information which enable individual to recognize and understand the various options available to them upon.
- 3) Standards and Operational Support where the group reinforces and encourages individuals to work unselfishly for the common good of all.
- 4) Relationships with Authority Figures where personal power and control is transferred to a charismatic leader who ultimately transforms individual power to

a shared power where social capital is used to collectively solve life's problems.

- 5) "Appropriable" Organizations that traditionally are not considered for specific purpose of transferring social capital but are often become an excellent source for social capital.
- 6) "Intentional" Organizations formed for the singular purpose of creating social capital and are often totally voluntary in working for the common good of all.

According to Putnam, America has created more new religions than any other society. Therefore, religious organizations in America must comprehend their capacity to strengthen the social interactions within to create social capital that will positively affects its membership and the greater community [12].

6. CHURCH, AFRICAN AMERICANS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

. Historically, church has played a very important role in the social and political development of African-Americans. Harris [13] found that the social capital found in churches is more beneficial to African-Americans than any other ethnic group. Additionally, most African-American churches possess a horizontal power structure where relationships facilitate the creation of social capital [14]. When power is top-down, vertical, certain community problems are often viewed as unimportant to the larger organization. The African-American church as a prolific source of social, human and economic capital that has positively influence members of its community over the years [15]. For African-Americans, church has been and still is an important source of emotional support that happens as a result of the give-and-take of information, opinions, and shared sentiments of the membership [16].

7. RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

The research question ask "How and why does participation in activities at church increase the positive social capital required for the academic success of African-American children, ages 10-12, who experience decreased levels of positive neighborhood social capital?" The hypotheses are:

- 1) African-American children, ages 10-12, who participate in activities at church and increase their opportunities to acquire positive social capital, experience academic success.
- 2) African-American children, ages 10-12, who participate in activities at church and increase their opportunities to acquire positive social capital through interactions with adults, as church leadership, experience academic success.

- 3) African-American children, ages 10-12, who participate in activities at church and increase their opportunities to acquire positive social capital through amplified opportunities to develop positive attitudes about education and academic success.

8. METHODOLOGY

The research design was a bounded, explanatory, single-case study that explored the phenomenon through various perspectives to reveal all aspects of the investigation topic [17]. The setting for this single case study was a Christian church geographically located in a large northeast city. A church was selected because all six forms of social capital are available, and its horizontal power structure views community concerns as important [18]. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select the research participants that could provide the data needed to enlighten the researcher about the phenomenon under investigation.

9. DATA COLLECTION

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of children ages 10-12 that participated in activities at the church and a focus group was held with adult church leaders who worked directly with the children to collect the perceptual data needed for the case study. Nonparticipant observations at several Sunday church services and meetings provided the theoretical data for the study. Contextual data acquired through review of certain church documents confirmed that the selected setting possessed a culture that facilitated that attainment of goals and behaviors that may not be attained without the social systems within the setting. Parents interviewed completed a personal data form that included age, sex, race, economic status, education, family size, marital status, employment, and neighborhood information to collect demographic data.

10. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

The demographic data gathered from the personal information forms indicated that the research participants interviewed had a mean age at 47 and a median age of 42. Therefore the parents interviewed were older and their responses held value because of their mature life experiences. The majority of parents interviewed were mothers, at 60% and fathers and grandparents were included, at 20%. The majority of perspectives examined

were mothers but perspectives of fathers and grandparents created variety in the points of view considered.

In the study, 46% of the parents were married and 54% of the families were single-parent households. The perspectives of both single parent and two parent households were analyzed in this case study. 47%, possessed an undergraduate college degree or above and that 73% were employed full time. 33% earned between \$20,001 and \$30,000. Another 33% of parents earned \$40,000 or more. Concluding, the majority of parents were employed full time, possessed college degrees and experienced more economic advantage than disadvantage.

The level of neighborhood social capital was also assessed in the personal data form. 73% always or often spoke to neighbors. This was expected because of the Christian values shared by parent research participants. 66% indicated they would never allow a neighbor to babysit and 73%, revealed they would not borrow from a neighbor. 40% socialized informally with neighbors on the block, while 27% never socialized informally with neighbors on the block. 86%, never socializing formally with neighbors on the block and 67% percent shared that sometimes crime is a problem in the neighborhood. Finally, 73% shared they never feel secure having their children playing outside without supervision. The data collected around neighborhood social capital revealed that the children of parents interviewed experienced decrease levels of social capital in their neighborhoods.

11. ANALYSIS OF PERCEPTUAL DATA

Data was analyzed using a thematic approach that included six phases: (a) getting thoroughly acquainted with the data, (b) creating codes, (c) looking for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and refining, and (f) reporting. The above process allowed several consistent themes to surface that answered the research question, how and why participation in church activities increases the positive social capital required for the academic success of African-American children, ages 10-12, who experience decreased levels of positive neighborhood social capital.

12. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF PERCEPTUAL DATA

There are three major consistent themes and four subthemes that were revealed from analysis of the data. The themes were; (a) Organizational Social Capital, with the subthemes It takes a Village and an Unapologetic Youth Orientation; (b) Servant Leaders; (c) Positive Attitudes with subthemes Positive Personality Traits and Christian Principles.

A. Major Theme One: Organizational Social Capital

Organizational social capital was sustained and generated at the church examined in this case study through its commitment to collective nurturing and its unapologetic youth orientation for the children that participated in activities. Subtheme 1: It Takes a Village was demonstrated through collective nurturing in the church.

The Reverend of the church shared a sermon entitled, "Take Your Hands off My Child" on February 16, 2013 where he expressed the importance of collective nurturing.

If we're going to be the Church of God! If we're going to be the people of God! We have to care about the development of young people. The sign of a culture is seen in how it takes care of its children and what we give to the next generation.

In an interview, a parent shared "It helps so much with the parents bringing them (children) up. Like Pastor says, 'It takes a tribe,' and it does. It takes a whole tribe. It takes a whole family. It takes a whole village."

A grandparent expressed how collective nurturing has helped to her grandson:

When Reverend says, "It takes a village." It does because it's taken all of us! All of my family and all of the church family to bring him up. And I think without all this help, he would be one of those kids you would look at and say what happened to him?

During the focus group, a servant leader explained how collective nurturing adds more accountability:

I think we provide a higher level of accountability in terms of academics. So I think they are accountable to more than their parents or even their families, but they have a larger community or village that they have to be responsible to.

On December 19, 2012, the church Pastor delivered a sermon titled, "We Have to Take Care of Our Children",

Go the extra mile. Even if you're not a parent, some of you have been placed in the community to come alongside of parenting. God has brought these children into your life to pick up the pieces. Sometime you come alongside of families. There are children right now that need what your flexible single life has to offer.

Churches are essential to the nurturing of today's child because it has the ability to create and maintain the social capital needed to guide children into adulthood. Collective nurturing creates an environment where closure exists and children know there is a network of adults working cooperatively to assist in them gaining the established norms and values of the group. Consequently, when churches dedicate themselves to collective nurturing, children can increase their opportunities to attain the norms and values required for academic success by the support found in closed networks.

This research also revealed that subtheme 2: Unapologetic Youth Orientation will transform churches into environments that demonstrate their focus by creating a wide-range of activities for participation.

In a sermon entitled, "We Have to Take Care of Our Children," delivered on December 16, 2012, Senior Pastor Reverend Dr. A.W. stated, "We're not wrong in this church to claim that we are unapologetically youth orientated,"

On February 16, 2013, the Pastor explained how the church demonstrated its unapologetic commitment to youth:

One of the reasons that we fundamentally said we going to build that field back there and we put down the discussion of expanding the parking is because parking was for the pleasure of some adults. The reality is that field back there facilitates what we been doing with kids all through this community and we wanted to symbolize that we are unapologetically youth orientated.

Presenting children with non-traditional choices, rather than the traditional of choir members, ushers, and Sunday school will attract and increase participation in activities in religious organizations.

B. Major Theme 2: Servant Leaders

Servant Leaders, the second major theme, revealed that children who experience increased opportunities to acquire positive social capital through interactions with adults, as church leadership, achieve academic success. Servant leaders are the adults in charge of the different activities at the church and provide children with increased opportunities to interact positively with adults. Servant leaders are very significant in children acquiring academic success because having opportunities to interact with adults outside of their family who hold them accountable provide higher standards to abide beyond the expectations of the immediate family. This higher standard of accountability increases academic expectations, and success. Churches that incorporate adults to serve as leaders of activities provide the children higher standards that lead to academic success in school.

Parents explained how and why interactions with servant leaders help with academic success:

I mean you could be here and the servant leader pretty much gets familiar with all the students and have rapport. You know, just talking to them. I do believe that having an adult around, a constant present person that's in your face makes you accountable.

Servant Leaders shared an important responsibility during the focus group:

So they see that we care. We call them. It's a responsibility to call the family. We ask the mom and dad how the kids are doing. And they'll give us a report then once the kid comes to us, then it's our responsibility to

take that information and do something with it.

Churches that include adults to serve as leaders of activities provide children with more accountability, access to educational information, and encouragement which leads to educational success.

C. Major Theme 3: Positive Attitudes

The third major theme, Positive Attitude, found that positive attitudes around educational success are a result of : Positive Personality Traits and Christian Principles. These subthemes make it possible for children to attain the positive attitudes needed to achieve in school. Children that participated in activities at the church gained self-esteem, confidence, self-discipline and responsibility from the support and activities designed to encourage self-control and accountability. One father shared how a specific ministry helped develop his daughter's self-esteem:

From the moment she started participating, her whole outlook and the way she is totally changed, absolutely. She's no longer the little shy girl. The teacher said she's the one that speaks up in class. Now, she's the confident one.

A grandparent shared how learning self-discipline helped her grandchild, "I think participating in church gives the children more self-discipline or self-structure for themselves, not just in school, but anywhere they go."

During the focus group, Servant Leader's explained how participation develops the responsibility needed improve positive attitudes about academic success, "You need to be able to work with others and take responsibility for your own actions."

Self-esteem, self-confidence, self-discipline, and responsibility are some of the positive personality traits developed in the children who participate in activities at the case study church. These positive personality traits contribute to the development of the positive attitude needed to achieve academic success.

Christian principles, as a point of view, helped develop the positive attitude children need to succeed. Christian principles include prayer, reading and reciting scripture, which produce an inner self that pushes beyond difficulties to achieve the academic goals that lead to success. Therefore, activities that children participate in at church must include the sharing of Christian principles and the actions that reinforce these principles.

In the focus group, Servant Leader's discussed the importance of prayer and scripture in the youth ministries:

They come with attitudes, you know, and I always tell them, it's a lot going on school and things like that. But don't let it define you. The main thing they do before they kick and jump is pray, and learn scripture.

Another parent told how Christian principles encourage

the youth that participate in activities at the church:

They also are given the opportunity to be successful in knowing who Jesus Christ is and who they belong to. They are made aware that it's okay to be different. It's okay to study. It's okay to prepare for our SATs because all those opportunities are there at the church for them.

The positive personality traits developed in the children who participate in activities at the church help create the positive attitude around the significance of succeeding academically. The Christian principles taught and reinforced at the case study church nurture the positive point of view needed to develop positive attitudes around the importance of academic success in school.

13. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings of this research project revealed that neighborhood churches must come alongside of public school education and aid in helping underachieving students residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Neighborhood churches can greatly assist underachieving students by providing more opportunities for children who experience reduced social capital to acquire the social capital needed for academic success.

To support the academic success of children must neighborhood churches must:

- make children a priority in the organization;
- practice and commit to collective nurturing;
- have adults serve as leaders to children that participate in activities and mentor them through the sharing of information, reinforcement of norms and values, and increased academic accountability;
- generate a plethora of unique activities that attract participation and develop positive personality traits, such as self-esteem, confidence, self-discipline, and responsibility; and.
- use Christian principles and its customs, such as prayer and reading and reciting scripture, to create a positive point of view

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research is recommended in diverse settings such as civic or other social organizations in the communities that serve children. Action research projects will also establish best practices for youth programming at neighborhood churches and help churches examine their present situation, identify any limitations, and work cooperatively to move forward. Finally, future research recommendations must include interviewing or surveying children to gain their perspective on the impact positive social capital has on academic success.

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Dr. Sylvia D. Briscoe was born in Philadelphia, PA., where she attended and graduated from its public school system. She earned a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Argosy University's School of Business in Phoenix, Arizona in October, 2013. She received her Masters of Science Degree in Education from Antioch University located in Yellow Springs Ohio in January, 1979. Dr. Briscoe attended City College of New York

located in New York, New York where she received her Bachelor of Science in Education in September, 1974. Dr. Briscoe's major field of study is social capital and academic success in children.

Currently she works as a consultant for Neighborhoods United Against Drugs and other non-profit organizations located in Philadelphia, PA. While working with the School District of Philadelphia, she served as Dean of Students, Lead Teacher, Junior Academy Mathematics Curriculum Coordinator, and Mathematics Fellow for Urban Systemic Program. At the Lafayette School Corporation, in Lafayette, IN, she assisted in writing and implementing the pilot program, Slice of Tomorrow, aimed to create life-long learners of elementary students through multi-age grouping, team teaching techniques and technology in the classroom. Some of her key accomplishments are the development and implementation of a successful Saturday School Program for At-Risk Students, Coordinated and collaborated with TOVA: Artistic Projects for Social Change to develop Peacemakers program to promote positive decision making, attended C.A.T.C.H Program at Fruedenthal Institute in Utrecht, Holland that focused on Inquiry Learning and using assessment to guide instruction and lead and developed workshops for 300 teachers to increase the level of mathematics instruction using inquiry learning. Dr. Briscoe continues her research around social capital and academic success of children.

Dr. Briscoe is a member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars. She served as member of Indiana School Technology Enterprise Council, elected as the first female President of Lafayette, IN. Chapter of the N.A.A.C.P, and served on the board of the Hanna Community Council Her research was presented and published at the conference titled: Crisis in Education: From Problems to Solutions sponsored by the African-American Council for Educational Justice.