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# Child and Family Teams Building Social Capital for At-Risk Students: A Research Note

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*We argue that sociologists interested in social capital theory and social work scholars interested in child and family teams (CFTs) can productively collaborate in studying at-risk youth. Social capital theory suggests dimensions of CFTs that delineate both family meeting intervention and implementation of the resulting plan. These dimensions reflect both bonding and bridging social capital that strengthen and widen supportive networks for students and their families. We develop a model to apply to both academic and social outcomes, specifically to student grades, students' home environments, and overall family functioning. We argue that our framework may be one of substantial generality, and thus useful in studying multiple outcomes for at-risk youth.*

*Key words: Social capital; child and family teams; family group; at-risk youth; academic outcomes; social adjustment*

How students fare in their homes and schools greatly influences their development and later life opportunities. Scholars in both sociology and social work have devoted considerable attention to how families and schools promote youth well-being, or fail to do so. Sociologists have focused on analyzing the impact of existing variation in social capital at home and at school on child and adolescent outcomes (see Parcel, Dufur, *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, June 2012, Volume XXXIX, Number 2

& Zito, 2010, for a comprehensive review). Social work scholars are interested in how interventions with families can build social capital that youth can use as key resources in furthering their development over time (see Green & Haines, 2007).

In this article we argue that these two communities of scholars have much to learn from one another; such intellectual collaboration may be especially important when we study at-risk youth, and when we design research and practice to promote their academic progress, social connections, and participation in decision making. We briefly review literature focusing on social capital and child and family teams (CFTs). We then argue that CFTs in schools are one important mechanism through which social capital can be built. School-based CFTs are planning forums in which the students and their families, community supports, and school personnel take part in decision making to resolve issues affecting students and their families (Pennell, 2008). We develop a model that shows the relationships between social capital and elements of CFTs. We also identify what types of research are needed to demonstrate the usefulness of the model for enhancing student and family participation and student academic and social outcomes.

### Conceptual Framework: Investment in Children and Adolescents as Social Capital

Children grow and develop within the context of multiple institutions. Although children's first major influences come from the family, the wider world begins to exert more impact as children mature. These ideas are derived from work by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), who argue that children develop within multiple spheres of influence, where these spheres are nested beginning with the family and moving outward towards the larger culture.

The first context children experience is their home; investments that parents make have significant and long-term consequences for children. We take a particular interest in social capital, because the last decade has witnessed an upsurge of interest in the effects of social capital on children. Coleman (1988, 1990) argued that social capital is a resource that is

parallel to financial and human capital. Accordingly, we distinguish social capital from human capital and financial capital at home (see also Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). By social capital we understand resources that inhere in the relationships between and among actors that facilitate a range of social outcomes.

Family social capital refers to the bonds between parents or caregivers and children which are useful in promoting child socialization. As such, this includes the time and attention caregivers spend in interaction with children and in monitoring their activities and promoting child well-being (Dufur, Parcel, & McKune, 2008; Hoffmann, 2002; Parcel & Dufur, 2001a, 2001b). Family social capital also encompasses the broader family group, that is, kinship networks based on blood, law, and informal arrangements. These familial connections are especially crucial for students from low-income families and neighborhoods, and for children of color, who are often most at risk of academic failure (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). They are an important means of cultural preservation and racial pride (Roberts, 2002).

Noting Putnam's (2000) distinction between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital, these intra-family connections refer to *bonding* social capital; these bonds are usually presumed to facilitate the positive growth of children and adolescents. In addition, there is considerable empirical evidence that children benefit from the social connections that parents or caregivers have with others such as neighbors, school personnel, and work colleagues (Crosnoe, 2004; Dufur et al., 2008; Parcel & Dufur, 2001a, 2001b). These connections illustrate *bridging* social capital; the stronger these connections, the greater are the resources to which children have access. The notion that family connections with schools provide an important source of bridging social capital is one that we rely upon heavily in this article. In addition, such connections are an important foundation for democratized decision making within the larger context of restorative practices (Adams, 2004).

Despite this optimistic scenario, some have argued that there is the potential for social capital to operate negatively in social systems (Portes, 1998; Rankin & Quane, 2002; Somers, 2005). For example, Portes (1998, pp. 15-16) suggests that social capital can have negative consequences through mechanisms

such as exclusion of individuals not part of given networks. In this case, social capital helps those within a given network, while those excluded from the network will not have access to the same resources. A case in point, students of color, as compared with their white counterparts, are more likely to be tracked into lower-level classes (VanderHart, 2006), thus limiting their peer models of academic achievement. Being African American in high school, rather than White, is associated with lower grades and higher rates of detentions and suspensions, and these effects are mediated by a school's racial climate, that is, perceived sense of racial fairness, experiences of racism, and need for change (Mattison & Aber, 2007). A negative racial climate is an indicator of exclusion from social capital. In addition, Portes (1998, pp. 16-17) argues that group membership may carry onerous demands for conformity, and/or promote norms inconsistent with academic achievement (see also Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Farkas, Llera, & Maczuga, 2002; and Harris, 2006).

The issue of negative social capital has received relatively little attention. For example, Coleman's (1990) work largely ignores this possibility, with most of his arguments on behalf of social capital phrased in positive terms. Although Putnam (2000) acknowledges a dark side to social capital, his emphasis is on demonstrating that social capital is positively associated with tolerance, as well as economic and civic equality, all positive outcomes. Others contend that social capital fails to specify how families and individuals "generate, accumulate, manage, and deploy" social capital (Furstenberg, 2005, p. 809; Portes, 2000), a limitation that we believe CFTs can help to address.

Furthermore, we posit CFTs as a means of making visible their social capital to students, of helping them make better use of it (Laser & Leibowitz, 2009) and changing how schools perceive their family groups. For instance, school personnel may have assumed that an African American father living outside of the home was absent from his children's lives and now can better identify and align with his contributions to his children (see Coles & Green, 2010). Attitudes among school personnel, however, will need to be addressed. Interviews with school and community participants after an introductory CFT

training in a rural, predominately African American county in North Carolina showed often conflicting perceptions about whether families should be involved in their children's schools (Taliaferro, DeCuir-Gunby, & Allen-Eckard, 2009). Some welcomed such involvement as enhancing student's achievement, others voiced skepticism and stated that families should only come to campus when requested, and yet others expressed sympathy toward families for avoiding the often less than hospitable school environment.

Returning to Bronfenbrenner's framework suggesting the importance of multiple spheres of social influence, we argue that capital at school is also important for child and adolescent outcomes. School social capital refers to the bonds among parents/caregivers, children, and schools that support educational attainment, and should also have implications for social adjustment. These bonds can reflect community ties and the relationships that parents and children form with teachers, and, as noted above, are an important form of bridging social capital. That these common norms are suggested to predict both academic achievement and social adjustment is important because CFTs may be able to promote both positive academic and social outcomes. This framework is especially useful to analyses of at-risk youth, and can suggest theoretically framed vehicles for timely intervention to promote better social and academic outcomes. There are compelling theoretical reasons to suggest that school social capital can be helpful to children at-risk, and that involving schools in strengthening social capital for children can have salutary outcomes on child and adolescent development.

The sociological literature has less to say about how social capital can be built, with many studies, such as those cited above, using statistical techniques to assess the impact of naturally occurring variation in this capital on variation in child outcomes. Adam Gamoran and his colleagues, a partial exception, are studying the role of after-school programs as a mechanism to build family and school social capital to promote child well-being (Turley, Lopez, Gamoran, Turner, & Fish, 2010). At the same time, practice in the field of social work has identified using CFTs as a strategy through which decisions can be made in a participatory manner that generates social capital

to promote child well-being (for examples, see Adams, 2004; Morrison & Ahmed, 2006). We argue that parents, students, teachers and community members can build social capital by using CFTs to strengthen the school and home environments for children and share insights regarding how changes in their respective interaction patterns with children can promote better child social behavior as well as academic achievement and civic participation.

### What is a Child and Family Team?

Child and family teams (CFTs) involve the student, family, extended family, school, and community in making and carrying out plans to address concerns about student behaviors and achievement and underlying issues affecting performance. The leadership of the students and their families in making plans is supported through respectful preparations (see Pennell & Anderson, 2005). These are characterized by the CFT facilitator and other involved school personnel inviting the students and their families rather than demanding their participation, agreeing on the purpose of the meeting, determining with them the list of attendees, and consulting on where and how to hold the meeting so that it reflects the family group's culture and promotes safe and effective deliberations. At the meeting, the family leadership is fostered by the school staff clarifying the purpose and process, ensuring that information is provided in a way that is comprehensible to the family group, supporting rather than leading the planning, and authorizing and resourcing the family group's plan. These steps facilitate the building of trust, an important form of social capital, among group members.

The plans that school-based CFTs devise often include mental health counseling for the student, additional parent-teacher conferences, extra tutoring in academic subjects, change of class setting for the student, and mentoring by community members such as athletic coaches and religious leaders (Pennell, 2008). Involving multiple organizations is often necessary in order to address the wide spectrum of needs of referred students and their families (Gifford et al., 2010). CFTs have the potential to build social capital by fostering

participatory decision making and joint implementation of plans to assist at-risk students. Such engagement strengthens the linkages within the family (bonding) and among the family, school, and other community organizations (bridging). CFT is one of several terms that designate engaging families in making and implementing service plans. Other terms include family group conferencing, restorative conferencing, and team decision-making. The names for family meetings reflect differing legal and local contexts and fields of practice.

### Do Child and Family Teams Work?

#### *System of Care Enhancing Child Mental Health*

In the child mental health practice field, CFTs refer to a team planning process supporting a system of care for children with severe and persistent emotional issues. The aim of a system of care is to wrap a comprehensive and unified array of services and supports around children and their families (Burchard & Burchard, 2000). A review of 14 initiatives found that system of care has the potential to help emotionally disturbed children and youths stay in the community, stabilize placements, adjust better to school, and commit fewer delinquent acts (Burns & Goldman, 1999). An advantage of system of care is that it offers a comprehensive approach to service; at the same time, this makes it difficult to specify the effects of CFTs themselves, because implementing CFTs is often accompanied by other interventions. Thus, competing explanations for improved child behavior cannot be ruled out conclusively.

#### *Family Meetings Maintaining Family Ties*

Several studies argue that family meetings held by child welfare agencies keep children with or connected to their families and kin and reduce the disproportional placement of children of color into care outside their extended families (Sheets et al., 2009). For example, in Washington, DC, where most children removed from their homes are African American, evaluators found that the 454 children for whom a family meeting was held as compared to the 335 demographically similar controls had significantly higher rates of placements with kin (rather than non-relatives) and were reunified more quickly with their



families (Pennell, Edwards, & Burford, 2010). Notably, in a service setting where relations are often strained within families, and between them and service providers, research shows improved relationships among family members and between them and both child protection workers (Burford, Pennell, & Edwards, 2011) and children's schools (Staples, 2007). These findings indicate that CFTs, in highly stressed situations, can strengthen bonding within families and bridging between families and service providers. These studies do not explicitly test the mechanisms through which social capital works but point to avenues through which it operates.

#### *Family Meetings Reducing Some Youth Crimes*

In juvenile justice, family meetings focus on holding youths accountable for their behaviors, making amends to the victims, and preventing future delinquent acts (Liebmann, 2007). The aim is restorative justice, that is, to set things right for all key stakeholders, rather than punishing offenders (Zehr, 2002). A systematic review of 36 restorative justice programs, as compared with criminal justice measures such as prosecution and incarceration, reported reductions in repeat offending for some types of offenses, doubling or more than doubling of cases brought to justice, and decreases in victims' post-traumatic symptoms and their fear and anger toward offenders (Sherman & Strang, 2007). Youths for whom recidivism increased were often highly marginalized youths, such as Australian Aboriginals and American Hispanics who had committed property offenses. The exceptions are worrisome because these populations are precisely those most likely to require supports to remain in school.

#### *Family Meetings in Schools*

The results in these other child-serving systems are relevant to schools because children and youths do better at school when they are not struggling with emotional disorders, dealing with trauma as a result of child maltreatment or removal from their homes, or participating in delinquent activities. Moreover, the experiences in child mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice settings all suggest that family meetings improve relationships and, thus, lend support to the

social capital framework we have noted. Unlike these other settings, however, schools serve much broader populations, focus on academics, and, if they provide family or community services, they offer these on an optional rather than mandated basis. Additionally, the culture of many schools runs counter to the adoption of family meetings. In particular, zero-tolerance policies for student misconduct lead to suspensions and expulsions, outcomes that are inimical to building the social capital that these children and youths need to achieve long-term school success.

In an effort to change their approach, most schools that institute family meetings approximate those used in juvenile justice settings by emphasizing responses that restore relationships rather than punish wrongdoers (Morrison, 2007) and, thus, presumably increase social capital. Their intent is to move away from disciplinary reactions, with family meetings primarily applied to school attendance, behavioral problems, bullying and violence, and reintegration into school (Liebmann, 2007). As a consequence, these family meetings focus more on reducing rule infractions and less on improving academic achievement. Studies repeatedly indicate that students and their families prefer this approach, like the resulting plans, and perceive the meetings as improving home-school relationships (e.g., Baker, 2008; Crow, Marsh, & Holton, 2004). Because some school personnel are resistant to restorative processes, CFTs are more successful if they involve the school leadership, provide needed training, and allocate sufficient time for organizing and conducting the meetings (Drewery, 2007; Morrison, 2007). Conversely, if meetings focused on educational outcomes do not include school personnel, their effectiveness declines (Holton & Marsh, 2007).

To create a supportive climate for students, some schools have adopted "whole school" approaches that include family meetings along with other restorative interventions, such as education on bullying and peer mediation (e.g., Buckley & Maxwell, 2007). This appears to increase effectiveness of the meetings but makes it difficult to separate the impact of family meetings from other interventions. A case in point is a 2007-2008 study of largely Hispanic/Latino middle and high schools in Denver, Colorado (Baker, 2008). This study found

that among the 812 participating students, those who took part in multiple restorative interventions were more likely to make gains in attendance and following school rules.

### Our Conceptual Model

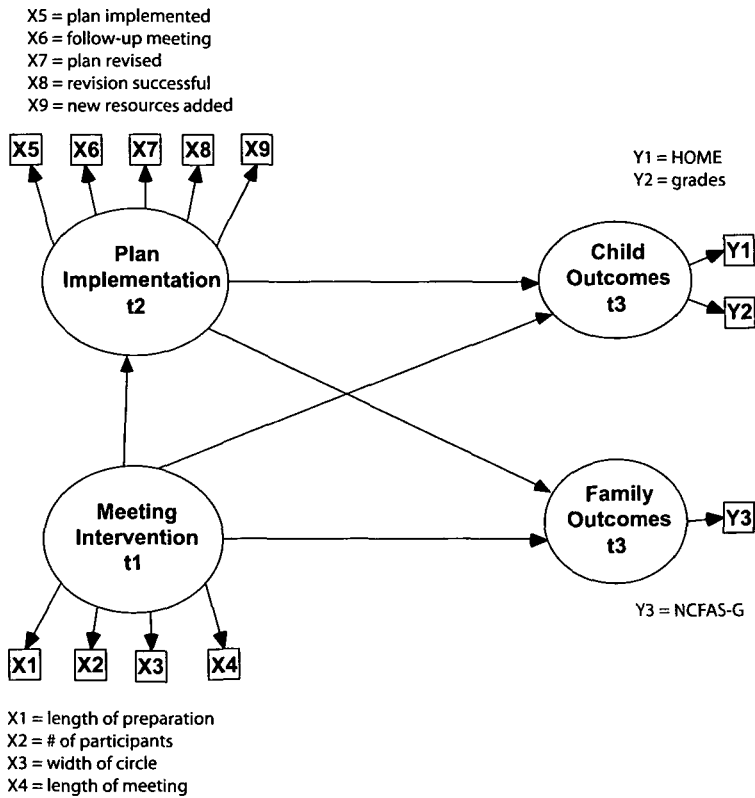
Our conceptual model argues for the potential of CFTs to increase home and school investments in at-risk students and improve student performance, thus reducing the chance of student dropout. Involving parents in schools has repeatedly been shown to significantly raise students' reading and math achievement (Nye, Turner, & Schwartz, 2006). We move beyond the sociological study of variation in existing social capital to focus on building family and school social capital. Building social capital is especially crucial for students from socio-economic and cultural backgrounds that disadvantage them in the school context.

#### *Meeting Intervention and Plan Implementation*

Figure 1 summarizes our model for how families and schools can build social capital with and on behalf of at-risk students; it diagrams the process that occurs after a child's family agrees to participate in a CFT, where the hypotheses are combined into a causal model with unmeasured constructs hypothesized to cause the variables we actually measure (Bollen, 1989). This model assumes that social capital is built both through Meeting Intervention at Time 1 and Plan Implementation at Time 2. The Meeting Intervention has two main phases. The first is the meeting preparation: preparing the family, community, and school participants for taking part in the meeting. The second phase is the meeting itself. Key elements of the intervention include the length of preparation for the meeting, number of participants, width of the circle, and length of the meeting. These elements of intervention are shown as X1–X4. We believe that each of the measured indicators reflects the concept of social capital such that more favorable values on respective measures should be associated with building stronger social capital, and thus potentially better student outcomes. For example, longer preparation should facilitate building social capital at the meeting. Larger numbers

of participants suggests that when more involved parties are willing to work with one another to help the at-risk students, the bridging social capital will be stronger on behalf of the students. Width of the circle refers to the number of different contexts from which participants will be drawn. Having participants from community groups (e.g., church, scouting) beyond the home and the school suggests the potential for creating additional bridging social capital on behalf of the child.

Figure 1. CFTs Building Social Capital



Plan Implementation occurs at Time 2. Dimensions of implementation include whether the plan was actually implemented; whether there was a follow-up meeting; if the plan was revised in response to the family’s changing circumstances; whether the plan revision was successful, and whether new resources were added to the plan (e.g., counseling for the

parent). These indicators are shown as X5–X9. We hypothesize that carrying out key elements of the plan increases social capital; as we state above, just taking part in the meeting can increase social capital. A follow-up meeting, plan revision, successful plan revision, and new resources added to the plan each reflect an opportunity to strengthen the plan, thus building social capital with and on behalf of the student.

### *Outcome Measures*

We believe that building social capital via CFTs will promote better school connections, academic achievement, and capacity for civic participation. All three are mutually supportive. Schools often propose CFTs for students who are struggling academically, but, at the same time, these academic difficulties are often intertwined with problems of social adjustment that are reflected in acting out at school, truancy, and other social behaviors that interfere with learning. As noted above, implementing CFTs has shown promising results in promoting academic achievement as well as reducing some youth crimes and promoting better student mental health.

In addition, we believe that CFTs can help parents to construct stronger home environments for their children, which can be measured in terms of safety, intellectual stimulation, and maternal warmth (see Parcel & Menaghan, 1994, regarding the HOME scale). CFTs can also promote better family functioning more generally. Kirk, Kim, & Griffith (2005) have demonstrated that family functioning can be measured using the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale for General Services (NCFAS-G). This scale taps eight domains of family functioning including parental capabilities, family safety, family interaction, and child well-being. More conceptually, the stronger bonds that parents and community members form on behalf of the child frequently provide additional guidance for parents in promoting positive interactions among family members, thus contributing to stronger bonds within the family. These stronger bonds reflect one aspect of social capital that we believe may be causally related to improved student outcomes.

### Future Empirical Work

As we have noted above, evidence that is supportive of our model in a general way comes from mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, and, to a lesser extent, schools where less research has been conducted. All these studies point to the benefits of CFTs in strengthening relationships within the family group and between them and service providers. Because CFTs are built around the leadership and culture of the family group, this approach is especially important for students of color in creating a school climate that is receptive to their cultural backgrounds and encourages their development and learning. Given the ambivalence that schools often have toward family involvement, CFT training and ongoing technical assistance are important to successful implementation of the program.

To evaluate the proposed research model would require longitudinal data on both the CFTs and child and family outcomes we have identified. We would need to study sufficient numbers of cases, each consisting of data on students and their families, so that we could evaluate whether variation in the form and functioning of CFTs was associated with student academic success, stronger profiles of social adjustment, and improved family functioning. Such data production would require cooperation from both schools and families who would be willing to work together on behalf of at-risk students. Only with this investment of time and resources could we evaluate whether the theoretical model we have sketched has empirical support.

In conclusion, we believe that our model is a general one that may be useful in the study of additional dependent variables. Academic outcomes, such as retention in school and high school graduation, may also be a function of successful family team meetings. Social outcomes, such as reduced acting out and lower levels of juvenile delinquency, may also follow the successful implementation of CFTs. We look forward to research that enables scholars to bring evidence to bear on these additional hypotheses.

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