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# Making sense of social capital theory through the lens of adult learning

Maurice Taylor, Gillian Kajganich & Ivana Pavić



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## Introduction

The problem of defining adult learning and measuring its impact on key outcomes is complex and multi-layered. In the past, adult and workplace learning has been associated more with formal education and training and is often seen through a narrow policy lens of preparation for upgrading and employment and as a means for increasing wages and productivity (HRSDC, 2009). The existing literature attests to the already abundant knowledge base undertaken to measure these types of returns to human capital (Riddell & Sweetman, 2000; OECD, 2001; Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brassett-Grundy & Bynner, 2004; OECD, 2005, Machin, 2006). However, with the current global financial crisis and the need for greater social inclusion of several Canadian sub groups such as Aboriginals, immigrants and people with disabilities and workers with low skills, it has now become important to better understand adult learning through formal, non-formal and informal avenues and to look beyond measures of earning and move towards measures of learning (HRSDC, 2009).

As indicated in a recent OECD report “a great deal is known about how much people earn after having completed an additional year’s schooling, but a lot less is known about other outcomes society intends education to provide and even less about unintended consequences of learning” (OECD, 2006, p.15). According to the Canadian Council on Learning (2008) and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2009), there are

considerable gaps in our knowledge of adult learning and ways for understanding and measuring the non-economic outcomes to learning. In addition, a recent report from the OECD (2005) acknowledges the fact human capital theory links education to economic returns but there is not yet a widely accepted theory linking education to social outcomes. As suggested by Hudson and Anderson (2006) our understanding of the non-economic returns to learning is vastly underdeveloped (p.19). Some early evidence does seem to indicate that learning produces social as well as economic returns to individuals, firms and society at large. For example, pockets of empirical studies attempt to show the causal connections between education and health (OECD, 2007). In a similar vein, Desjardins and Schuller (2006) suggest that continuous learning over the life course has been linked to everything from economic prosperity to greater political participation. It is also theorized that education results in greater civic and social participation, decreased poverty and crime rates and greater social cohesion. However, the nature and extent of these connections remains to be determined. One small but important area that may further the debate on this complex topic is adult learning and social capital.

## Purpose of Research and Literature Review Approach

The purpose of this research paper is to begin the early process of mapping out the terrain of adult learning and social

capital theory. The research questions that guide this work are: (1) what are the various historical antecedents and early conceptualizations of social capital theory that are useful in understanding adult learning and training? (2) how should this information be consolidated in a systematic way that builds on the theoretical position of human capital? (3) what work has been done in the field of adult literacy learning and social capital? Results of this focused literature review could contribute to our knowledge base on this emerging topic and raise additional questions as to how to move forward in deepening our current understanding especially with the marginalized population of adults with low literacy.

The approach taken for conducting the literature search began with the identification of a set of criteria for selecting both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed articles to include in the structure of the paper. These criteria included: learner population, age, diverse learning environments, providers of adult education and types of informal learning. As a way of tracing the seminal work already done on social capital theory, the early writings of such authors as Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1987), Putman (1995) and Portes (1998) were considered important. These works are presented for the novice reader under the first theme - Social Capital Perspectives. A second component of the review presents a short history of the literature on human capital as a means of introducing its co-evolution with social capital and the important work of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD) from 2001-2007. This theme area is used as a backdrop for the third section which begins to explore the integration of adult literacy learning and social capital. Of particular interest to this section are the studies that have drawn from the seminal work of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and a framework for social capital indicators.

### **Social Capital Perspectives**

Tracing the systematic idea of social capital as a concept begins independently with two sociologists who were interested in the field of education – James Coleman (1987) and Pierre Bourdieu (1986). Both of these sociologists arrived at a theoretical definition of social capital as a way of understanding the effects of the social environment, the social connections and social relations through their own applied research. Coleman’s framework (1990, p. 302) was based on his intuition that the social relations characterizing the social structure within which individuals act are also a resource for individuals. As Castiglione, Van Deth and Wolleb (2008) suggest this approach of systematizing social capital was a way to reconcile individual action and social structure and self interested behavior in social analysis. Drawing from his applied research Coleman was interested in understanding the relationship between educational achievement and social inequality. In particular his empirical work included a number of longitudinal studies of US high school students which were designed to compare outcomes of state schools with those in

Catholic schools. His findings indicated that students in Catholic schools had higher levels of attainment and that teachers had higher expectations of their students suggesting that this would be beneficial for students from the disadvantaged backgrounds.

In some respects Coleman's use of social capital provided more of a post explanation of the results but his more significant contribution was his definition of social capital which influenced policy makers. Over the next few years he refined this notion within the educational context as follows "social capital is the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organizations and that are useful for cognitive or social development of a child or young person" (Coleman, 1994, p. 300). Although this work inspired much debate, it was also widely criticized. For example, Portes (1998) argued that a clear line needed to be drawn between membership of social structures and the resources acquired through such membership. He also explained that Coleman had overemphasized close ties to the neglect of weaker ties, which might be more effective in providing access to new knowledge and resources (p. 4-5).

As Baron, Field and Schuller (2000) point out Bourdieu's interest in social capital stemmed from a series of studies that attempted to view culture as a dynamic, creative and structured phenomenon. This concept emerged from a metaphor relating to social space. Like Coleman, he viewed social capital as the resources that come from belonging to a group.

However, his focus was on developing a theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986). He considered both the material and symbolic resources that individuals and groups use to reproduce conditions in which they live and the relative relationships of power that characterize any given society. According to Bourdieu (1984), there are three main ways or fundamental guises of how resources can be accumulated in order to give individuals in society a head start. He names these usable resources and powers as economic, cultural and social capital. His use of capital signals the important idea of addressing differential resources of power and the linking of the cultural to the economic. It is interesting to note here that as much as he acknowledges the primacy of economic capital and stresses the importance of cultural capital, it is social capital that is a distant third.

For Bourdieu, social capital is not reducible to economic capital or cultural capital, nor is it independent of them. In his later writings, he defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.... which provides each of its members with backing of collectively owned capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p.251). Although he significantly contributed to the theoretical debate on social relationships, his work was also criticized. Baron et al. (2000) maintain that as much as Bourdieu attempted to theorize the reproduction of class relations and repeatedly put social

capital at the heart of his analysis, it still remains conceptually underdeveloped.

In essence, Coleman's contributions explored how resources of social capital might counterbalance low levels of human capital and cultural capital. Through empirical evidence he was able to demonstrate concrete ways in which social capital interacted with other aspects of stratification. On the other hand, Bourdieu used social capital to explain the ways in which elite groups used their contacts to produce their privilege as the basis of social reproduction and successful power transference. In other words, his focus was on the individual dimension of social capital as a resource – through networks leading to various outcomes. Both of their theories helped to bring the concept of social capital to many different disciplines but it is the work of Putnam who popularized the concept in public and political discourses.

In the mid nineties, the Harvard political scientist, Putnam, turned his attention on the decline of civic engagement in the United States. In his analyses of attitudes and behaviours ranging from drinking coffee with neighbours to political participation, Putman identified a secular decline in social capital. Here he refers to social capital as those features of social life networks, norms and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 1996). More recently, his definition of social capital focuses on the existence of networks of reciprocity or networks of social connection that produce norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness among

individuals. Putman (2000, p.171) summarizes it this way - "social capital is about networks".

By developing this concept, Putman illustrates how people's motivations and choices are not simply triggered by their individual circumstances, but also by their social insertion and involvement in community life. Through an empirical state level analysis of the United States, he traces the correlations between high levels of social capital and various types of desirable social conditions such as lower crime rates, higher levels of economic prosperity, better levels of health and happiness and more successful educational outcomes (Putnam, 2000). Both Coleman and Putman view social capital as a public good, a community resource that tends to be undervalued and in short supply. In this view of social capital public good tends to emphasize its potentially positive or functional characteristics while avoiding any discussion of its potential downsides.

Another interesting approach to social capital that builds on the research of Coleman and Putman is the work of Lin (2001, 2008) who views it as a concept and a theory. As a concept it can be seen as investments in certain kinds of resources that are of value in a given society and when viewed as a theory, can be described as a process by which capital is captured and reproduced for returns (2008). When viewed in this way it is then possible to formulate theoretical propositions for identifying the sources of social capital and the returns to social capital. Lin (2001) defines social capital as "the resources

embedded in a social network, resources that can be accessed or mobilized through ties in the networks” (p. 49). As a network theory of social capital, he proposes three principal sources for social capital. The first source is structural positions, for example a worker’s position and the strength of that position in the organization or company. A second source is the network locations or in other words, a workers location in the network that has certain features that allow for bridging or openness. Finally, the third source is the purposes of action such as maintaining cohesion or being. Another interesting feature to the network theory of social capital is that it can be described from a micro perspective as well as at the macro level analysis “where the research interest lies in investment, formulation and returns to social capital for the collectives be they associations, organizations, communities, regions or nation states” (2008, p.63).

For the purposes of this literature review and its focus on adult literacy, social capital can be understood as trust, goodwill and networks of human collectivities rather than with isolated individuals. As the Centre for Literacy (2005) reports, social capital is increasingly being used to discuss literacy as a phenomenon of human relationships rather than individual skills. Some of the underlying principles that help form the concept for adults with low literacy focus on community based settings and networks of relationships and social cohesion in which learning takes place and what is learned is practiced (p.6). This notion

seems to fit in well with the academic approach towards literacy that has gained some momentum recently. This approach represents adult literacy as embedded in contexts of relationships and social values, or in other words in the literacy acts and literacy events that take place within the networks of social life.

### **Measurement of social capital**

Any discussion on the measurement of social capital can be seen from various perspectives due to definitional diversity and the issues of validity. Baron et al. (2000) seem to suggest that questions of measurement can be categorized into three main issues; the methodological challenges of measuring social capital; the problems of explanation across time and the problem of aggregation of data from individual levels to social structural levels (p.26). However, from a different perspective, Castiglione et al. (2008) propose a ‘bottoms up’ approach to issues of operationalization and measurability of social capital. In a similar vein, Van Deth (2008) maintains that it is possible to view the major measures of social capital in a classification scheme. He reports that there are several broad categorizations across three dimensions. The first dimension focuses on what is meant by the characteristic. By this he means structural or cultural aspects. For Van Deth structural aspects can be discerned as networks or other forms of contacts between actors and cultural aspects refer to trust and confidence on one hand and civic values on the other hand. The second dimension is level of

analysis. According to the author, social capital can be conceived either as an aspect of relationships among individuals or as a collective good. The third dimension is related to data collection methods and these can include surveys, statistics observations and experiments.

Although there is a gap in the literature between adult literacy and the measurement of social capital, Dika and Singh (2002) do provide a meta synthesis of the social capital literature in elementary and secondary education since its inception in the late 1980s. This review even though it was done a number of years ago does point to some emerging trends in this field. Still in its infancy, social capital research and its connection to educational outcomes has substantially evolved in the last two decades. As part of their review, Dika and Singh explore the literature in an attempt to determine whether there is empirical and theoretical support for claims linking social capital to educational achievement, educational attainment and psychosocial factors that affect educational development. This is done through an examination of trends in conceptualization, design, methods, and measurement of outcomes during three time periods: 1990-1995, 1996-1998, and 1999-2001.

The first two periods consist of the earliest educational studies in social capital research. During the period 1990-1995, the common focus seems to be on educational achievement with minority populations and includes such work as Smith, Beaulieu and Israel, 1992; Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995,

and Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995. Issues in this body of literature are examined through the lens of outcomes which varied and, often times were not grounded in theory. The subsequent period (1996-1998) saw a prevalence of social capital studies through survey design. Collectively, these studies also defined outcomes but in terms of educational achievement measures such as grade point average, achievement test scores, and educational attainment measures which included dropping out, high school completion, years of schooling and college enrolment (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997; Lopez, 1996).

The last period in the review article (1999-2001) points to an increase in volume and diversity of social capital studies in educational research literature. Dika & Singh cite 21 studies that testify to the various qualitative and quantitative methods employed to look at indicators of social capital such as in the works of Fritch, 1999; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Lareau, 1999, and Morrow, 2001. The trends that emerge are largely methodological in nature and include the increased use of case study and other qualitative designs like observations, document analysis and focus groups. The common indicators demonstrated by this group of studies which mainly focus on children and adolescence include: family structure, parent-teen discussions, parents' aspirations and expectations of their teens, parental education, and intergenerational closure.



## The Co-evolution between Human Capital and Social Capital

Historically, human capital is more of a mature theoretical position than social capital and has up until recently dominated thinking about education and training in many societies. Through the work of Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964) this framework has occupied a dominant position in understanding skill acquisition by economists. At the root of this framework is the idea of individuals and companies investing in skill acquisition through education and training. Because of the individual nature of certain skills and knowledge, there is a focus on the analysis of investment that has the highest return. In other words, as Fine and Green (2000) assert, whether the employee or the employer pays depends on the type of skills being created and the competitive structure of the capital and goods market (p.87). By adding value to these different types of knowledge and skill reservoirs, it yields a measure of the human capital resources available to a country's economy. However, because of the individual differences in the conceptualizations of these measures, national systems require the use of certain types of measures. In the area of adult literacy assessing literacy levels such as with the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the Adult literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS) serves this function.

Over the decades, as Healy and Cote (2001) point out, the concept of human capital has proven to be very useful in orienting research and public policy development. For example, researchers

have examined the degree to which various investments in knowledge and skill development have paid off both for individuals in terms of improved employment earnings and personal wellbeing and more generally for the overall health of the economy and society. Furthermore, Judge (2003) explains that these researchers have been able to examine the costs of investments in knowledge and skills by individuals and companies and the importance of various factors in shaping these investment decisions. They also have been able to study the role of public policy programs in the way that they have helped to form decisions on investment in adult education and training.

However, with the dominance of human capital theory and its extensions to many disciplines, the definition has been extended more broadly. For example, the OECD (2001, p.18) expanded the definition of human capital as "the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes individuals embody that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic wellbeing." Even though this expanded definition has been helpful it is not without its shortcomings. Schuller and Field (1998) noted the productiveness of the idea of human capital, but go on to say that it evokes a narrowness of the notion of education and is met with problems surrounding its measurement. The authors believe that the linear model of human capital often implies that investing in education yields returns in the same way as investing in stocks and bonds with measurable and tangible results (Baron et al.). In a

similar vein, Judge (2003) maintains that efforts to measure stocks of human capital have emphasized educational credentials as a simple but weak proxy measure. In addition, poor data quality and a basic understanding of the complex nature of human capital and economic growth have hampered efforts to measure the impact of growth. The question is now raised - will social capital prove to be similarly helpful?

Fine and Green (2000) seem to suggest that the role of social capital can be seen as a means to counterbalance the hegemony of the human capital approach to education and training. In this sense it emphasizes the non economic objectives of learning and the social norms that may motivate individual participation in education and training. This idea that social relations can form a capital asset makes good intuitive sense. As Woolcock and Narayan (2000, p.3) report, the basic idea of social capital is that a person's family, friends and associates constitute an important asset, one that can be called on in a crisis, enjoyed for its own sake and leveraged for gain. Furthermore, the authors maintain that what is true for individuals is also true for communities. In other words, those individuals and communities with a stronger stock in social capital are able to navigate the various challenges that they face more effectively. A case in point is the work of Balatti and Falk (2002) who illustrated the notion of social capital as a means of understanding the socioeconomic contributions of adult learning in a particular community. This study is

further described in the next section of the review.

### **Situating adult learning within a lifelong learning framework**

Any discussion on the complex interrelationships among adult learning and training, capitals and various outcomes needs to be situated within a lifelong and life-wide learning framework. This is important because outcomes associated with learning can be conceptualized in various ways. Outcomes can be direct or indirect and they can be intended and unintended. In other words, outcomes can range from those that affect the individual adult learner, the family, companies and organizations and communities. Seen through this broadly based viewpoint, outcomes associated with learning affect the economy and society.

Important to this discussion of lifelong learning is a clarification of some of the key terms such as education, schooling and learning. The recent OECD (2007) reports "Understanding the social outcomes of learning" provides some important distinctions and are taken up here. For instance, the report suggests that education is not simply limited to initial schooling and can be viewed along similar lines to that of the lifelong learning perspective. However, when referring to education most of the empirically related discussion refers to the more formal levels of education recognized with qualifications. Often education and training systems refer to the organized provision of educational experiences. Learning, on the other

hand is seen as a broader set of experiences and interventions. Most often these educational experiences vary in the degree of formality especially with regard to structure, objectives, recognition and intentionality (p.18). A useful way of looking at these educational experiences is through three commonly known settings; formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning.

According to the OECD (2007) report, formal learning usually takes place in an educational or training institution such as a community college or private training agency. In such experiences the learning is structured in terms of course objectives, a specified time of instruction and leads to some form of certification. From the adult learner's perspective, this is intentional learning. On the other hand, non-formal learning does not take place in an educational or training institution nor does it lead to certification. Often times, it is offered in the workplace by work specific organizations or groups. This kind of learning is also intentional from the learner's perspective. The third type of learning is referred to as informal and encompasses daily life activities related to work, family, community and leisure. Like non-formal learning, informal learning is not structured and usually does not lead to certification. In most cases, it is incidental or non-intentional.

Picking up on a point made earlier, any attempts to sketch out the relationships of learning needs to be analyzed within the lifelong learning (lifespan) and life-wide learning (multiple contexts) framework (OECD, 2007, p.35). This is

necessary because outcomes result from adult learners encountering multiple contexts of learning and not just schooling or job-related training. The conventional linear pattern would suggest that after initial formal education, an adult encounters learning throughout life in the contexts of the workplace, in the contexts of social and civic life and in the milieu of home, family and leisure life. This learning over the lifespan can be encountered through the three adult learning contexts mentioned above; formal as in certification for a trade, informal as in firm training on how to provide effective customer service and informal learning such as figuring out how to perform a certain task by observing a knowledgeable co-worker. This type of illustration highlights the various interrelations among the different forms of learning and the fact that there can be different types of outcomes. In this way learning can be broadly understood as competencies that arise out of human and social capital. These in turn can be classified into economic and social outcomes such as individual and collective, monetary and non-monetary. This idea will be furthered later in the section.

As mentioned previously, the connections among human capital, social capital and learning have become of interest to many scholars and policy makers in education and training. (Coleman, 1988; Schuller & Field, 1998). In the earlier OECD (2001) report entitled "Cities and regions in the new learning economy" a core question that is central to this literature review is posed in the study - What is the

importance of social capital in determining the processes of learning? The cursory answer provided in general terms is that a “lack of social capital impedes learning and economic success” (p.100). In yet another OECD (2001) report entitled “The Wellbeing of Nations” social capital is defined “as networks together with shared norms, values and understanding that facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (p.41). Providing further support for this idea of learning as a social activity within an adult lifelong learning context, Field and Schuller (1997) suggest that “Social capital treats learning not as a matter of individual acquisition of skills and knowledge, but as a function of identifiable social relationships. It also draws attention to the role of norms and values in the motivation to learn as well as in the acquisition of skills and the deployment of new know how (p.17).

### **Towards the study of social capital in adult learning**

One study that illustrates the relevance of social capital and the wider benefits of adult learning at the community level is the work of Balatti and Falk (2002). The model that is incorporated in their Australian adult education case study is one which views human capital and social capital as inextricably linked. Building on this model, the outcomes that are discussed are connected to the eight OECD indicators of social concern (OECD, 1982). However, Balatti and Falk (2002) argue that the work conducted by the OECD has overlooked the integral component of social capital in its

discussion of the role of knowledge and identity resources in the construction of adult learning benefits. The authors examine ten programs within the Australian education system, and through participant interviews, outline a wide range of direct and indirect mutual benefits of adult learning. These benefits have positive outcomes that extend beyond the individual learners to their larger communities.

Balatti and Falk argue that social capital is intrinsic to the learning process and, thus, necessary in effective adult learning. This learning process is necessary for realizing the socioeconomic outcomes of adult learning. Further, the realization of the socioeconomic benefits is brought to light through identity formation/reformation and skill attainment. In addition, the authors sketch out a wide range of outcomes and mutual benefits that arise from adult learning under the categories of: health, education and learning, employment and quality of working life, time and leisure, command over goods and services, physical environment, social environment and personal safety.

As such, Balatti and Falk’s study provides a blueprint for the social outcomes of adult learning as within each of the eight categories they include specific examples of outcomes. For example, in the category ‘education and training’ specific outcomes were reported such as learning information technology skills or progressing to other formal and informal learning opportunities. In another category ‘employment and quality of working life’

as improving work practices such as safety and job satisfaction are outlined. This study was one of the earliest explorations of the relationship between adult learning, social capital and outcomes and in doing so, the authors call for the need for additional research on the concept of social capital.

From a different learning perspective, studies in the United Kingdom that investigated the knowledge and skills for employment found that there was a need to include adult informal learning in any account of a learning society. Empirical evidence from these studies supports the idea that human capital and social capital are not in direct opposition to each other but in a relationship of theoretical and practical tension. Baron, Field and Schuller (2000) suggest that a relationship exists between human capital and social capital on several fronts which include focus, measures, outcomes, models and policy. This relationship was further refined in the OECD social outcomes of learning project (2007). As a short history of this project, the OECD has long argued that education plays a vital role in enabling economic growth and sustainable employment. Through the social outcomes project (SOL) they were interested in extending their analysis to wider social domains and breaking new ground by exploring causal relationships between education and health and civic participation. Its overall intention was to produce policy relevant tools and analysis on the links between learning and wellbeing. An underlying premise of this initiative was that there are links between education and personal, social

and economic development that need to be better understood. It is within this OECD report entitled “Understanding the social outcomes of learning” that a discussion resumes on the connection between human capital and social capital.

As a simplified framework, the OECD (2007) report suggests that there exists an interrelationship between human capital and social capital and by understanding this connection it is easier to consider the potential complementarities inherent in three elements – focus, measures and model. The principal idea is that human capital cannot be taken out of its context of social relationships. Within this perspective, social capital complements the established concept of human capital and deals with infrastructure that allows it to be more effective. It also suggests that learning outcomes of all kinds will be a function of the interactions between human capital and social capital (p. 38-39).

One of the main distinctions between the two types of capitals is that in human capital theory the primary focus is on the individual agent such as the adult learner or trainee. In social capital the focus is on the relationships and networks that these adult learners and trainees form as a result of some type of learning, for instance, at the workplace. What is important here is that individuals and their human capital or the knowledge and skills acquired are not seen as discrete entities that exist from the rest of the company that they work in or from other social units that they belong to. The acquisition of these

skills and competencies depend on the social and normative contexts within which they operate. This normative component refers to trust, reciprocity, tolerance, understanding and respect for others. For example, an employee may take a one week training workshop and increase his or her qualifications; however the impact of this training on the company will depend on how the new learning is incorporated into the shop floor activity by the relationship of the individual with other employees who make up the immediate work group.

A second interaction between human capital and social capital are the measures used. Human capital is measured and quantified in most cases by the duration of education or by levels of qualifications achieved. Up until recently, the thrust of this measurement has been on initial education. More recently, large data sets such as the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the Adult literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS) have been providing measures of the stock of human capital, however costs are high and there is a lack of repeated measures over time. On the other hand, social capital is measured more broadly in terms of attitudes, values, and trust levels or by levels of active participation in civic life such as voluntary organizations or in other networks. One way of looking at this is through network membership and how it provides access to important information and ideas which is often the goal of informal adult learning. As reported by the OECD (2007) "in its application to education it gives greater

weight to informal modes of learning and the skills acquired through learning-by-doing" (p. 39). Baron, Field and Schuller (2000) also go onto to say that organizations can actively encourage their staff to be involved in their surrounding communities and through this participation they will acquire important knowledge skills and values.

Another point of relationship between human capital and social capital is based on the type of model. For example, human capital suggests a very linear model. What this means is that investments of time and money are made and economic returns follow in direct proportion to the amounts that have been invested. For instance, countries can administer tools such as the IALS to estimate the returns to investments on adult education and training and governments use these results to justify the expenditures on the human capital formation. Most empirical applications of human capital only focus on the impact of schooling or job-related training on earnings. Since social capital is more diffuse and not as definable, it has a much less linear model and can be described as an interactive or circular model. For instance, social capital can be seen as a consequence as well as the producer of social cohesion. In this approach social capital is not only an outcome of learning but also a key input into the learning process (OECD, 2007).

Another important argument forwarded is that the measurement of competencies is a step forward in the study of learning outcomes because it provides a more direct measure of what

students actually learn. The inclusion of competencies and attributes broadens the definition to include motivation, attitudes and beliefs about control, capabilities and efficacy. In a general sense, one reason for developing and maintaining competencies is to generate wellbeing; ranging across economic, social and personal wellbeing (p.42). Taken together, human and social capital becomes a means to realizing wellbeing. As such, wellbeing is a complex concept that encompasses a range of economic and social conditions. Gilomen (2003) summarizes the various dimensions of wellbeing which are relevant in modern societies. Such dimensions include: economic positions (human capital) resources, political rights, intellectual resources, person health and security and social networks (social capital). According to OECD (2007) economic and social outcomes are closely intertwined and based on McMahon's work (1998) can be classified between monetary and non-monetary as well as private and public outcomes. Based on the OECD framework, social outcomes of learning are the private non-monetary benefits such as life satisfaction and health status and the public non-monetary sphere such as social cohesion and trust. Drawing from McMahon (1998) other private non-monetary benefits of education that are of interest to this review include: lifelong adaption and continued learning; use of technologies in the household; curiosity and educational reading, radio and TV; utilization of adult education programs; productivity of non cognitive skills; non-monetary types of job satisfaction and enjoyment of classroom experiences.

On the public non-monetary benefits side, McMahon mentions such benefits as time volunteered to community service; knowledge dissemination through books and informally; community service effects of education.

### **Adult Literacy and Social Capital Outcomes**

Tett, Hall, Maclachlan, Thrope, Edwards and Garside (2006) provide an extensive analysis of the perceived benefits of adult literacy and numeracy learning through a social capital lens. This study compares learner and teacher perceptions of adult learning in nine geographical areas of Scotland. The goal of the study was to assess the impact of participation in adult literacy and numeracy (ALN) programs on individuals' lives. Over 600 learners and 75 tutors were interviewed for their perceived benefits of literacy programs. Of particular interest was the focus on participation impact on adult learners' personal, family, work, education and public lives. The discussion in the area of learning, teaching and the curriculum suggested that more than 90% of adult students felt that the literacy experience was positive. In particular, students noted that the social nature of the course was a way to socialize and network.

As a way of operationalizing social capital, Tett et al. (2006) define it as the processes between individuals that establish norms, networks and trust to facilitate mutual benefits. It is this "combined effect of trust, networks, norms and reciprocity [that] creates

both strong communities and a sense of personal and social efficacy” (p. 13). As a result, the study highlighted the need for active and willing engagement of individuals in the creation of social capital. The data analysis demonstrates that confidence in oneself was linked to social capital and prior experiences of learning.

Overall respondents had very high social capital as they generally liked their neighbourhoods, were well integrated in their communities, voted and looked for opportunities for more local involvement (p. 4). In other words, results indicated a link between engagement in learning and increased social capital. These findings indicate that there are many positive outcomes of adult literacy programming. As well, findings also suggest that the creation of social capital can have a positive impact on learners’ lives especially in the areas of personal, family, work, education and public lives. The increase in confidence, seen in data collected over time, was correlated to the ability of learners to acquire new skills and network with peers. This increased confidence in other areas of their lives led Tett et al. (2006) to conclude that: “this newly found sense of self had been used to open doors into other worlds and activities that learners would not previously have contemplated, and they had grown further in the process” (p. 14). It appears that the effect of learning in ALN courses raises people’s sights and is a positive influence on the cultural norms that encourage other to do the same. Learning and its benefits are dynamic in that benefits gained in one domain impact functioning in

others such as the family and the community. A fuller discussion of this argument can be found in Tett and Maclachlan (2008); Maclachlan, Hall, and Tett (2009); Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther and Edwards (2010) and Crowther, Maclachlan and Tett (2010).

In support for using social capital as a relevant framework for understanding participation in learning, Strawn (2005) has argued that the discourse of particular communities around education is an important component of social capital because it is a function of interpersonal interaction over time. Her research has indicated that people who live in communities where education is seen as advancement are more likely to participate in adult learning programs. In a similar vein, Maclachlan, Tett and Hall (2009) go on to further explain that social capital also has its dark sides. In other words, what was originally perceived as beneficially supportive arrangements such as mutually reinforcing ties have also been recognized as binding shackles in some circumstances for some groups in society (Croll, 2004). However, the national Scottish study results seem to indicate that on the whole, the learners had quite high levels of social capital at the start of their learning and this increased as the networks in both their courses and ties to the communities grew.

Related studies conducted by Balatti, Black and Falk (2007) also identified the pedagogy that a teacher uses as a factor that influences social capital outcomes experienced by participants in adult literacy and numeracy courses. More



specifically, this investigation looked at how instructors use the social capital that students bring to the classroom and the learning environments that have outcomes on the individual learner. A set of 12 indicators were used, which were based on a previous study (Balatti, Black and Falk, 2006) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) social capital framework (2004). The indicators measure change due to participants interaction in new networks. For example, change in the level of trust and the participants willingness to receive or provide support to others. This qualitative study was based on 75 face-to-face interviews with 18 teaching staff and 57 students across three cities in Australia.

Results indicated that pedagogical strategies and techniques used by instructors seem to cluster around three types of networks that students become members of simply through participation in a program. The first network is the formal network, the clearly observable structure and operation of the class. The second network is teacher-based, which involves the direct participation between teacher and student within and outside the classroom. Finally, the third network is the informal network, which can be defined as the informal network between student and student outside of the formal in class learning environment. Within each of these networks, the individual participant, through their interaction can experience a change in trust, an increased level of confidence, authentic engagement, respect for others, and various other social outcomes. These potential

outcomes are intensified by the pedagogical approach chosen by the teacher. Balatti, Black and Falk further describe the practice field, or the fostering of new identities and knowledge resources, and bridging, that is, the connections between the learning that take place within the classroom and its application outside the classroom as pedagogical strategies and techniques that serve the function of building social capital. Therefore, this “practice field” and the “bridging” that takes place, determines the “extent to which students risk new kinds of interaction in the networks that comprise their lives ... (and) the nature of the networks formed not only in providing the conditions for them to grow but also by influencing the nature of the memberships and the interactions of the participants” (p. 258).

Finally, in another recent study by Balatti, Black and Falk (2009), published by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER), in Australia, the researchers propose guidelines that identify approaches for the design and delivery of literacy and numeracy courses that facilitate social capital outcomes. The social capital approaches build upon the works described above by Balatti, Black and Falk (2006, 2007), with the use of interactions between networks within and outside the classroom to foster social capital outcomes. The guidelines are a product of the current literature and existing theory, three environmental scans and three action research projects that reviewed the results of teachers practicing various

strategies to increase social capital outcomes for learners within the health, finance and service sectors. Within the design and course delivery social capital approaches, Balatti, Black and Falk focus on three elements: partnerships involved within design and delivery; the policies that influence design delivery; and the pedagogical practices/strategies.

Balatti, Black and Falk confirm the findings of their previous work (2006, 2007) and further explain the need for partnerships in the whole community at all levels (macro, meso, and micro). Working together to partner within networks provides supportive policy and the intended provisions. "Such partnership arrangements have been termed *whole of government* or *linked up* approaches" (Balatti, Black and Falk, 2009, p. 7). In order for the partnerships to be effective in delivering social capital outcomes, governments, corporations and community groups need to hold similar values, bring different yet needed skills and resources to the partnership, develop a relationship of respect, work as a team, communicate effectively, demonstrate flexibility and find sources of sustainable funding. "In itself (partnerships are) an act of social capital building" (p. 32).

The study maintains that to build effective partnerships there also needs to be effective policies in place that guide the design and delivery of literacy and numeracy courses. Such policies build social capital. To do this Balatti, Black and Falk, suggest Wallace and Falk's "Principles of Policy Effectiveness" (2008) which facilitates collaboration

and produces benefits. The findings of the study indicate that the more the partnership bodies and sectors collaborate, the larger the effect on social capital and effectiveness on social policy outcomes. Further, balanced perspectives and understanding between all levels, macro, meso and micro, produces the best results.

From a pedagogical perspective, Balatti, Black and Falk argue that the approaches that benefit the learner the most in terms of social capital outcomes are those that go beyond the formal, non formal and informal networks previously discussed, to include the learner networks. They organize the most effective teaching strategies under three learner networks: the learner group, the existing networks and potential new networks. Further, the study suggests that the choice of pedagogical strategy is influenced by what resources the learner brings to the learning environment and the new set of resources the learner will develop through participation in the learning experience. The level of social capital outcomes experienced by the learner is dependent on the wider social context and the ability of the teacher to make the links between the learning experience and the wider context. Therefore, the main objective for the teacher is to maximize positive opportunities for change to build social capital outcomes and to minimize negative connections between the networks.

## Concluding Remarks and Ways Forward

This paper has traced the quest to measure adult learning through social capital which has emerged over the last three decades. In doing so, the infancy of social capital theoretical underpinnings and the inherent tie between human and social capital theory was highlighted.

In summary, this discussion paper has presented three perspectives or themes on the topic of adult learning and social capital. The first theme looked at the early conceptualizations and meanings of social capital theory. Although a short synopsis of the empirical evidence on the measurement of social capital is presented here as a sub section, a much more detailed account of this important dimension is required. This could be accompanied with a technical review of any tools or scales that have been developed to measure social capital or possible theoretical conceptions that could initiate the development and construction of an instrument that could be used with adult literacy learners.

In the second theme the co-evolution of human capital and social capital is briefly depicted. However, what appears to be missing in this area are other types of empirical work that examine the wider benefits of adult learning within the lifespan framework. Research questions and hypothesis need to be developed that connect aspects of the framework with key ideas of social capital such as bonding and bridging.

The third theme initiated a discussion on a more focused target population - adult literacy learners. What is now needed is a more detailed account of these studies as well as current projects that are now underway providing both a critical appraisal of the context in which social capital conceptions are used and the methodological limitations of these works.

From Bourdieu (1986) to Portes (1998), to the seminal work conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the influential evidence by Balatti, Black and Falk (2006, 2007, 2009), our attempt for this discussion paper has been to open up a dialogue on social outcomes of literacy and numeracy for adult learners with low skills through a social capital theoretical perspective. A new paradigm of social capital thought process emerges, whereby our focus shifts to not only the measurable financial outcomes of learning, but also to the intangible intrinsic benefits inherent to the individual and the spillover effects on the communities in which they live. In order to further fill this gap in knowledge, tools need to be developed and used with several Canadian sub groups such as Aboriginals, immigrants and people with disabilities. Finally, further investigation is warranted into the macro, meso and micro relationships and links that exist between human capital and social capital so as to further our conceptual understandings and applications for the future.



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