

# NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE VALUE OF CONNECTIONS

**SOCIAL CAPITAL'S STRENGTH LIES IN EXPERTISE, RECIPROCITY, AND RELEVANCE**

**By Wes Johnson**

**O**ver the past few decades, sociologists have used the concept of social capital to describe the various benefits of group membership. More recently, education researchers have used this concept to describe the effects of school-wide teacher professional development (Baker-Doyle & Yoon, 2011; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Penuel, Riel, Krause, & Frank, 2009). This approach to understanding professional development offers valuable insight into the types of resources necessary to transform teachers' professional learning.

Baker-Doyle and Yoon define teachers' social capital

as "the knowledge and resources for teaching practice accessible through a social network" (2011, p.76). The first step to analyzing teachers' social capital is to understand the structure of their social network. Some networks are highly interconnected, offering teachers numerous opportunities to share ideas and receive feedback. Other social networks are more loosely connected. In these networks, teachers can become isolated from their colleagues, and it can be harder for them to work collaboratively to improve teacher and student learning. (See diagram on p. 39.)

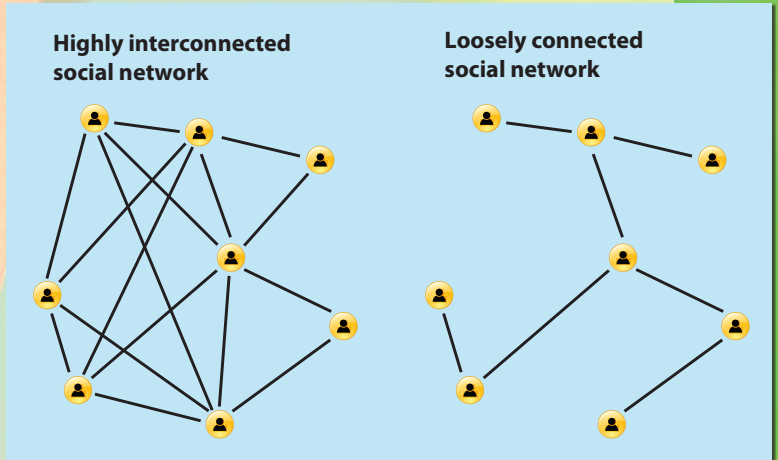
The strength of a teacher's professional learning community cannot, however, be measured by just the number and arrangement of connections. Instead, researchers must be able to describe what these connections offer teachers in terms of resources that can be used to support

teacher and student learning. According to social capital theory, teacher learning involves accessing and acting on these resources. Professional development can support this process by increasing the amount of social capital available to the teachers in a school community.

Viewing professional development as the accumulation of social capital allows researchers to reconcile two insights from professional development research: Collaboration is important to teacher learning, and teachers respond to learning opportunities in unique and unpredictable ways. Social capital theory allows researchers to explore both of these positions.

To some researchers, teacher learning is the process of initiation into a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They see teacher development as the process of adopting shared meanings and developing common practices. However, in social capital theory, teachers access knowledge and resources rather than meanings and common practices. Different teachers will use the resources in different ways based on their prior commitments and their individual needs. Social capital theory focuses on the active and self-conscious role teachers play in their own development.

This does not mean, however, that teacher learning is only an individual activity. Social capital refers to teachers' shared resources, not their private property. Because teachers access these resources through social



ties, the resources don't necessarily stay the same over time. On the contrary, teachers refine and redefine these teaching tools continually as they share them with other teachers and adapt them to new contexts. Unlike with traditional teaching resources such as pencils and chalk, teachers' supply of social capital grows as they share these resources.

#### CATEGORIES OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

In his seminal work on the topic, Coleman (1988) identified three forms of social capital. He viewed social

CATEGORIES OF SOCIAL CAPITAL			
Research	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Adler & Kwon, 2002	Information	Solidarity	Influence
Coburn & Russell, 2008	Access to expertise	Trust and shared norms	Depth and congruence of interactions
Coleman, 1988	Information channels	Obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness	Norms of behavior and enforcement policies

capital as something that can be cashed in by individuals for concrete benefits. For example, Coleman investigated how access to social capital can help a teenager secure a high school diploma. Adler and Kwon (2002) took a somewhat different approach. They explained how social capital could also be used as a tool for describing the qualities of different organizational structures. In their operational definition, Adler and Kwon identify three different effects of having social capital. These different approaches to social capital research illustrate some of the ongoing development of this concept in the literature.

Coburn and Russell (2008) were among the first to apply the concept of social capital to teacher professional development research. They investigated how administration policies affected the social capital available to teachers at different schools. Like earlier research, Coburn and Russell defined social capital as the resources exchanged through connections in a social network. They also identified three dimensions of social capital, which could be used to compare teachers' social networks.

The table above shows the categories used in these three studies to characterize social capital. Despite differences in their research agendas, each researcher found it useful to use similar general categories for describing social capital.

### WHAT THESE CATEGORIES TELL US

#### Category 1: Information or expertise

The expertise in a social network is equal to the sum of the personal knowledge and experience of all the members in that network. This knowledge becomes social capital through its use in two ways. The knowledge is first put to use in the classroom and then is used again as a type of social currency between teachers. Unless teachers have an opportunity to share what they know, their valuable expertise is hidden from their colleagues. As a result, the full value of this expertise to the school community will not be realized.

The term "expertise" refers primarily to the uniquely relevant practical knowledge of teachers inside the school com-

munity (Van Driel, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2001). A school's social network should provide a structure within which teachers can share their hard-won knowledge of successful practices. The same social network can also be used to disseminate new information from outside experts. In neither case, however, does the network play only a passive role. Instead, the network creates a learning environment that influences how teachers respond to the available information.

#### Category 2: How groups work together

If the first category represents the kinds of resources positioned in the network, the second category refers to how efficiently these resources are transmitted among the links in the network. True collaboration is a two-way street. Full participation in a professional learning community requires teachers to receive new ideas and offer their own contributions. Mutual trust is the essential element that allows for a free flow of information. Trust involves teachers viewing their colleagues' suggestions as meaningful. Trust also allows teachers to have confidence that their comments will be taken seriously.

Collaborative discussions provide the opportunity for much more than just an exchange of knowledge. These discussions are also a key component of teachers' reflective practice. Simple questions like, "Why did you do that?" force teachers to put their ideas into words. This is a necessary first step as teachers adopt an analytical approach to their instruction (Davis, 2003). At the same time, these discussions make reflective practice a social rather than an individual activity (Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles, & Lopez-Torres, 2003).

#### Category 3: Focus of groups' work

Just because teachers are in contact with one another does not necessarily mean their conversations will improve student learning. Teachers may be swapping stories, or they may be struggling with the tough questions of teaching and learning. Teachers may be complaining about administration policies, or they may be finding new ways to make these policies work.

Relevance is a measure of the extent to which teachers' conversations are oriented towards having an effect on teaching and learning at their school.

There is certainly value in a teacher's friendly conversations with her colleagues. These conversations can play an essential role in helping teachers deal with the many stresses associated with their demanding profession, as well as build trust to help social capital flow within networks. But the difficult work of teachers' professional learning requires something more from their interactions. Administrators and professional developers must also provide a mechanism that facilitates the rigorous exchange of knowledge if they expect substantial results from teachers' collaboration. Simply giving teachers time and space to work together is not enough.

Ideally, the administration would establish a common model of effective instruction to ground the teachers' collaborative activities as well as their personal reflections. At the very least, however, teachers must be able to link their collaborative activities with possible changes to their instruction. In order to make this happen, teachers should be encouraged to seek help from their colleagues to solve practical challenges. By experimenting with ideas they learn about from their colleagues, teachers will become more conscious of the valuable resources available through peer collaboration.

## DISCUSSION

For decades, educators have known that isolation can impede an individual teacher's professional learning. Baker-Doyle and Yoon's recent study (2011) approached the issue of teacher isolation from a different angle. They introduced the concept of the isolated expert teacher — someone who has valuable expertise but no mechanism for sharing it with his or her colleagues. In these cases, it is the task of administrators and professional developers to encourage this trapped expertise to circulate through the teachers' social network and increase their social capital.

Although there is no single method for increasing teacher social capital, the following five steps can provide a useful starting point for administrators interested in following this approach to supporting teacher learning.

1. Survey teachers to find out who is talking with whom. Use this information to diagram teachers' social networks.
2. Identify what expert knowledge exists in the school and what additional expertise, if any, needs to be brought in from the outside.
3. Find out whether teachers feel comfortable offering advice to colleagues. Identify any barriers that might exist to a more open exchange of ideas.
4. Ask teachers whether they find their professional development relevant to their instructional practices. Find ways to focus professional development on teachers' specific concerns.

5. Use information gathered from the first four steps to design structures that support meaningful teacher collaboration.

Simply providing teachers with opportunities to meet with one another is not enough to guarantee substantial professional growth. According to social capital theory, teacher conversations must be characterized by expertise, reciprocity, and relevance in order to best support teacher learning. Administrators who keep this in mind will be better able to assess the strength of their school's professional learning community and transform teacher learning at their schools.

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