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**Social capital and sense of community: What do they mean  
for young children's success at school?**

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**Abstract**

*Growing evidence suggests that social capital has wide-ranging benefits for families and communities. In particular, some studies indicate that social capital is linked to school success. These studies reveal that communities with high levels of social capital, as evidenced by strong social networks, feelings of trust and safety and community participation, afford children access to supports, information, resources, and role models that can contribute to positive academic outcomes. Related to social capital, sense of community has also been associated with success at school. This paper reports on selected findings from child data collected during the first phase of a 3-year longitudinal study of several communities in Queensland with recently established early childhood and family hubs. 388 children (aged 4-8 years) in five localities in Queensland were recruited from early childhood services including schools and kindergartens. The children participated in research conversations relating to social capital, sense of community, and their health and wellbeing. Significant differences were found between the children in the communities on all dimensions of social capital and sense of community. Differences for wellbeing were also revealed. Positive correlations were confirmed between children's social capital, sense of community and self-reported wellbeing.*

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

An expanding body of research demonstrates the impact of early experience on young children's brain development and its long-term implications for their education, health and well being (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Vimpani, 2004). Indeed, compelling research indicates that children's developmental trajectories can be enhanced by socio-ecologically-based interventions in early life (Vimpani, 2004). In particular, the quality of family supports and networks, ready access to appropriate services and information have been shown to overcome the disadvantages experienced by individual families (Edgar, 2002). As noted by the NSW Department of Community Services (2003), high quality health and education programs can significantly improve children's life chances at an individual and community level. Indications are that when communities have access to high quality early childhood and parenting programs, children are generally better prepared for school. Evidence such as this has seen the early years become a major social policy issue in Australia, one requiring a sociological response from government and communities (Vimpani, 2004).

### **Social capital**

For many years now, research from the United Kingdom and United States has confirmed that effective 'early childhood education and care' services (ECEC) have both short-term and long-term health and educational benefits for children and families (Ball, 1994; McCain & Mustard, 1999; OECD, 2001; Pascal, Bertram, Gasper, Mould, Ramsden & Saunders, 1999; Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2003). A related body of evidence also highlights the contribution of social capital (defined in this study as social relations and networks based on trust and reciprocity) to such benefits. Studies have revealed that communities high in social capital feature dense and complex social relationships, helpful information networks, clear-cut norms and perceptions of stability. These communities have significantly higher levels of wellbeing compared to communities with limited social capital which are characterised by alienation, fragmentation, loneliness, intolerance and vulnerability (Coleman, 1988; Fegan & Bowes, 2004; Jack & Jordan, 1999). Studies from the United States have linked high levels of social capital with wide-ranging health, education and financial benefits (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Runyon, Hunter, Socolar, Amaya-Jackson, English, Landsverk, Dubowitz, Browne, Bangdiwala & Mathew, 1998; Stone, 2001). Such is the promise of social capital that is acknowledged in Australia as one of five key determinants of social and family wellbeing (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2000).

A review of the literature on social capital, however, reveals that it is a highly debated theoretical construct (Fine, 1999; Foley & Edwards, 1999; Gamarnikov & Green, 1999; Hawe & Shiell, 2000). Conceptualisations range from Bourdieu's (1986; 1993) sociological account of different, yet interrelated, forms of capital (e.g., social, economic, cultural and symbolic) to Putnam's (2000, 1993) notion of social and community networks and civic engagement based on norms of cooperation, reciprocity and mutual trust. Additionally, social capital can be viewed as a group (e.g. community, family) resource capable of accruing public benefits (such as resources or infrastructure), an individual resource that accrues private or personal benefits (such as occupational mobility, health and psychological well being). Alternatively, social capital can be viewed as both an individual and collective resource that provides personal, as well as communal, benefits (Goddard, 2003).

Attempts to measure social capital are also many and varied. There is general consensus, however, that social capital is a complex multidimensional construct and that these constructs

must be culturally or contextually appropriate. Seminal work in the area by Australian researchers Onyx and Bullen (1997, 2000) revealed that social capital is underpinned by seven dimensions including participation in the local community, neighbourhood connections, family and friend connections, proactivity in a social context, feelings of trust and safety, tolerance of diversity, and value of life. Their study of five communities in New South Wales found that social capital was generally higher in rural localities due to their higher rates of community participation and stronger neighbourhood ties (Onyx & Bullen, 1997).

### **Social capital and school achievement**

Less comprehensive but equally compelling is a body of evidence linking social capital to school achievement. Few would dispute the impact of personal traits and dispositions on individual success at school. However, there is mounting evidence suggesting that this success is also influenced by the social supports and social capital available to children (Goddard, 2003). Some would claim that, for minority and working class children in particular, success at school is dependent upon social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). In these cases, Sanders (2003) notes, schools can become “islands of hope” for students whose social worlds are increasingly stressed and fragmented (p.163).

Recent research by Ainsworth (2002) found that neighbourhood characteristics, such as the amount and quality of social capital, not only predicted educational outcomes, their impact outweighed that of more commonly cited family-school related factors such as residential stability, economic disadvantage and racial/ethnic heterogeneity. As Ainsworth (2002) explained, children who grow up in communities possessing high levels of social capital are more likely to be exposed to helpful social networks or adults who provide positive resources, information and opportunities that may be educationally beneficial. Alternatively, children living in areas characterised by low levels of social capital can be disadvantaged by smaller social networks or networks that are less beneficial than those in more advantaged areas as a result of the social position of parents, friends and siblings. Further, children in impoverished neighbourhoods are disadvantaged because social interactions among neighbours tend to be confined to those whose skills and lifestyles are not conducive to promoting positive outcomes relative to those in more stable neighbourhoods.

Goddard (2003), too, found positive correlations between school achievement and social capital in his study of urban elementary schools in the United States. His findings confirmed that social capital had the greatest impact on student’s mathematics and writing abilities. In an earlier study, Runyan (et al., 1988) found that social capital was instrumental in high school students’ school retention.

Fullan, Watson and Leithwood (2003) also pinpointed social capital as a determinant of children’s school success. They maintained that, in relation to school outcomes, family social capital manifested itself in the following ways:

- Reciprocal obligations and expectations of one another held by family members ( the obligation a child feels to work hard at school is reciprocated by parental obligations to provide a happy, secure environment)
- The potential for information available in social relations (family knowledge of who to contact for assistance or advice)
- The existence of effective norms and sanctions that encourage some forms of behaviour and discourage others (family norms and expectations about appropriate behavior at school)
- The habits and dispositions evident in family members’ individual and collective responses

to problems (families can model self-efficacy when faced with difficult issues).

In light of such evidence, Sanders (2003) calls for stronger relationships between schools and communities. She maintains that, as a result of changes in both the structure and function of families and neighbourhoods, many children are growing up without the social capital necessary for healthy development. Sanders (2003) believes that through better connections with communities and through the sharing of knowledge, guidance and values, schools can rebuild their students' diminishing social capital.

### **Sense of community**

Related to social capital, sense of community refers to the feeling of belonging in a group. The absence of sense of community has been found to engender feelings of alienation, isolation and loneliness (Farrell, Aubry, & Coulombe, 2004; Sarason, 1977) while a strong sense of community has been linked to a range of positive outcomes including improved wellbeing, empowerment, sense of efficacy, life satisfaction, and happiness (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Martinez, Black, & Starr, 2002; Prezza, Amici, Roberti, & Tedeschi, 2001; Sonn, 2002). Research suggests that positive outcomes for adolescents with a strong sense of community include lower incidences of loneliness, reduced criminal behaviour, and performance gains and higher retention rates at school (Chipuer, 2001; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996; Pretty, Andrewes & Collett, 1994). Also related to school, one of the few studies of sense of community among children (aged 8-12) in the United States, found correlations between sense of community and increased academic performance, prosocial development and personal wellbeing (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000).

Although promoted by governments and agencies around the world, consensus surrounding the description, measurement and analysis of social capital, along with sense of community, remains elusive. Moreover, the use of measurement instruments, such as those used by Putnam (1993) and Chipuer and Pretty (1999) in the United States and Onyx and Bullen (1997) and Stone and Hughes (2000) in Australia has been confined to adults or adolescents. In contrast, our research seeks the views of children as key stakeholders in ECEC services because of the important contribution they can make to the nature of, and future directions in, the provision of such services. Further, studying social capital in ECEC services, as a prelude to school settings, may reveal for school educators insights about children and their experiences early in the school learning cycle.

## **THE CURRENT STUDY**

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study that bridges and advances several bodies of evidence by investigating the social capital, sense of community and wellbeing of young children, their families and community members in the context of a statewide initiative of integrated early childhood and family hubs in Queensland (Farrell, Tayler & Tennent, 2003; Tayler, Tennent, Farrell & Gahan, 2002; Tennent, Tayler & Farrell, 2002). This research is funded by the Australian Research Council with additional funding and/or in-kind support from six industry partners – The Department of Education and the Arts, Queensland, Queensland Department of Communities, Queensland Health, the Commission for Children, Young People and Child Guardian, the Crèche & Kindergarten Association of Queensland, the Australian Government of Family and Community Services, and Queensland University of Technology.

The aims of the larger study are to investigate the perspectives of stakeholders (i.e. children,

parents, hub personnel and service providers) on local service provision and hub operations; identify the factors that facilitate and hinder hub development in local communities; and, investigate social capital, sense of community and well being in hub communities. In light of the final aim, this paper focuses on a sub-set of the child data relating to social capital, sense of community and wellbeing.

The inclusion of young children as research participants is a conceptual and methodological characteristic of our research that is consistent with the sociology of childhood. In our study, children are viewed as reliable informants of their own everyday experience (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2003) who, as active social agents, shape their social worlds (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003).

Given the importance of social capital and sense of community to educational and other life outcomes, the study set out to determine if these constructs could be measured in young children, and, if so, whether levels varied across a variety of age groupings and localities. The study also sought to identify any correlations between these constructs and children's self-reported wellbeing.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The participants in this study comprised 388 children (aged 4-8 years) in early childhood settings including preschool, years 1, 2 and 3 classes in schools, and kindergarten childcare/family day care settings in five localities throughout Queensland. Three localities were rural, one was regional, and the other metropolitan. All localities conformed to funding requirements for the hubs initiative on the grounds that they were considered to be disadvantaged or located some distance from a major town or city.

### Procedure

Children were invited to engage in informal conversations with a trained practitioner-researcher in their regular early childhood setting. Ethical clearance was given by the University Human Research Ethics Committee and children and parents gave their informed voluntary consent to participate. Individual conversations, based around simple 3-point pictorial scale survey instruments, were conducted with each child to gain information on social capital, sense of community and wellbeing.

### Measures

As there were no standardised measures available for use with young children, all measures were developed specifically for the study. Social capital was measured using an adaptation of Onyx and Bullen's (1997, 2000) 31-item social capital instrument (1997, 2000). The new seven-item instrument comprised one item each (in italics) reflecting the following dimensions.

- Participation in community activities (*Are you in any clubs or groups?*)
- Neighbourhood connections (*How often do you get to see your neighbours?*)
- Family and friend connections (*How often do you get to see friends or relatives?*)
- Proactivity in a social context (*If you didn't agree with your friends would you tell them?*)
- Feelings of trust (*Would you say that you trust most people?*)
- Feelings of safety (*How safe do you feel in your neighbourhood?*)
- Tolerance of diversity (*Do you like being with people who are different from you, like from another country?*)

Sense of Community was measured using an adaptation of a 12-item, four dimension instrument

developed by Chipuer and Pretty (1999). The new four-item instrument comprised one item for each of the following dimensions:

- Reinforcement of needs (*Do you like living here?*)
- Sense of membership (*Do many of your neighbours know you?*)
- Feeling of influence (*Do you care what neighbours think of you?*)
- Emotional connection (*Would you like to live here for a long time?*)

Wellbeing was measured by asking children to rate how happy and how healthy they are and the extent to which they worry. In cases where a child did not understand a particular term, substitute terms were used, for instance, the term *neighbourhood* was occasionally replaced with *area where you live*.

### Data analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analysed using *SPSS for Windows*. Frequency statistics were employed to identify patterns among the responses, significant group differences were identified using Chi-square tests, while Kruskal Wallance tests were conducted to determine differences between the groups on aggregate constructs. Correlations between aggregated constructs were conducted using Spearman's rho.

## FINDINGS

Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of children in the study, in particular their location, early childhood group, sex, age in years and mean age.

**Table 1. Child demographics – location, group type, sex, age in years, mean age (n=388)**

<b>Location:</b>	<b>R1</b>	<b>R2</b>	<b>R3</b>	<b>Reg</b>	<b>Metro</b>
Number	106	33	53	96	100
<b>Group type:</b>	<b>Childcare/ family day care/kindy</b>	<b>Preschool</b>	<b>Yr1</b>	<b>Yr2</b>	<b>Yr3</b>
Number	49	82	66	101	90
<b>Mean age in yrs:</b>	4.0	4.8	5.9	6.9	7.9
<b>Sex:</b>	<b>girl</b>	<b>boy</b>			
Number	193	195			
<b>Age in yrs:</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
Number	60	83	65	97	83

### Social capital

Table 2 presents children's responses in each community on the individual social capital dimensions. Chi square tests revealed significant differences in responses on all dimensions. As can be seen, children's reported participation in local community and neighbourhood connections were highest in the metropolitan community but their reports of feelings of trust and safety were the lowest of the five groups. In contrast, feelings of safety were highest in the rural 3 community. These children also had the highest scores on family and friend connections. In

relation to tolerance of diversity, the rural 2 community data indicated significantly lower rates than all other communities.

The social capital items were aggregated to form an overall scale of social capital. Kruskal Wallance tests revealed that there were no significant differences in general social capital across the communities ( $\chi^2(4)=4.37$ ,  $p=.358$ ).

**Table 2. Social capital dimensions and significant differences in scores across communities.**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Highest score</b>	<b>Lowest score</b>	<b>Sig</b>
Participation in community	metropolitan	rural 1	$p<.01$
Neighbourhood connections	metropolitan	regional	$p<.05$
Family/friends connections	rural 3	rural 1	$p<.05$
Social proactivity	metropolitan, rural 2	regional	$p<.05$
Feelings of trust	regional, rural 2&3	metropolitan	$p<.05$
Feelings of safety	rural 3	metropolitan	$p<.05$
Tolerance of diversity	metropolitan, rural 1&3, regional	rural 2	$p<.01$

There were only two significant differences in responses to the social capital items according to group (kindergarten/childcare, preschool, year 1, year 2, or year 3). These were for participation in local community (significantly higher among the oldest group of children) and tolerance of diversity (significantly higher among the youngest group of children). Kruskal Wallance tests revealed that there were no significant differences in general social capital across the different age groups ( $\chi^2(4)=1.91$ ,  $p=.751$ ).

### **Sense of community**

In relation to sense of community, chi square tests revealed significant differences according to community in children's responses on all four dimensions. As Table 3 shows, children in the rural 3 community had the highest or equal highest scores on three dimensions – reinforcement of needs, feeling of membership and having some influence. Emotional connection, on the other hand, was highest in rural 1 community and lowest in the metropolitan community. The metropolitan community also had the lowest scores for reinforcement of needs, while children's scores for feeling of membership and having some influence were the lowest in the regional community.

The sense of community dimensions were aggregated to form an overall scale of sense of community. A Kruskal Wallance test confirmed that general sense of community was significantly lower among children in the metropolitan community ( $\chi^2(4)=28.67$ ,  $p=.000$ ).



**Table 3. Sense of community dimensions and significant differences across communities**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Highest score</b>	<b>Lowest score</b>	<b>Sig</b>
Reinforcement of needs	rural 1&3	metropolitan	$p<.05$
Feeling of membership	rural 3	regional	$p<.01$
Have some influence	rural 3	regional	$p<.01$
Emotional connection	rural 1	metropolitan	$p<.05$

There were only two significant differences in responses to the sense of community dimensions according to early childhood setting. These differences were for the feeling of membership and having some influence. The year 3 group were significantly more likely to report that neighbours knew them but significantly less likely to report that they cared about what their neighbours thought of them. A Kruskal Wallace test confirmed that general sense of community was significantly lower among children in the childcare/kindergarten group ( $\chi^2(4)=9.90$ ,  $p=.042$ ).

### **Wellbeing**

As Table 5 shows, there were significant differences across the sites in children's reports of their happiness and health and the extent to which they worried. Children in the rural 2 community were more likely to report that they were very healthy but the least likely to report feeling happy. These children were also had the lowest reports of worrying. Surprisingly, children in rural 3 community were the most likely to report that they worried a lot.

The health, happiness and worry items were aggregated to form an overall scale of wellbeing. A Kruskal Wallace test confirmed that overall wellbeing was significantly higher among children in R1 community ( $\chi^2(4)=23.96$ ,  $p=.000$ ).

**Table 5. Wellbeing dimensions and significant differences in scores across communities**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Highest score</b>	<b>Lowest score</b>	<b>Sig</b>
Healthy	rural 2	regional	$p<.05$
Happy	rural 1	rural 2	$p<.05$
Lack of worry	rural 1	rural 3	$p<.01$

In terms of early childhood group differences, Kruskal Wallace tests revealed no significant differences for health and happiness items. However, a significant difference was confirmed for worry, with the youngest group (child care/kindergarten) significantly less likely than the other groups to report worrying. A Kruskal Wallace test confirmed that overall wellbeing was significantly higher among the children attending childcare/kindergarten ( $\chi^2(4)=17.16$ ,  $p=.002$ ).

### **Correlations between social capital, sense of community and wellbeing**

Spearman's rho tests were conducted to determine any correlations between social capital, sense of community and wellbeing. Significant positive correlations were found between all three

aggregate constructs. In other words, the higher the children's levels of social capital, the higher their sense of community and reported wellbeing.

## DISCUSSION

The study confirmed that children are indeed reliable informants of their own everyday experiences (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2003). Their evidence shed some light on our limited understanding of social capital and sense of community, in particular as they relate to young children, and how these constructs manifest themselves across different communities and age groups.

In relation to social capital, our study revealed mixed findings. Although there was no significant difference across the communities on the aggregated general social capital index, significant differences were found for each of the seven individual dimensions. These findings provided some support for previous research such as that of Onyx and Bullen (1997, 2000) where social capital was found to be generally higher in rural rather than metropolitan or urban areas. In the current study, reports of family and friend connections, feelings of safety, feelings of trust, social proactivity, and tolerance of diversity were highest or equal highest among children in one or two of the rural communities. This was particularly true of the rural 3 community. Conversely, however, rates of community participation and neighbourhood connections were significantly lower in rural 1 community. These findings suggest that it may not be possible to generalise findings to rural communities *per se*. Instead, we need to identify the particular characteristics of individual rural communities that may contribute to, or hinder, particular aspects of social capital.

More coherent were findings concerning the dimensions: feelings of trust; and feelings of safety. Levels of these related dimensions were found to be significantly lower among children in the metropolitan community. Children's reports were mirrored by those of parents from this area who participated in our broader study. Levels of trust and safety among these parents were found to be significantly lower than levels within other communities. Data from these parents also revealed significantly lower income levels and higher rates of government assistance. Furthermore, children's and parent's reports are borne out by statistical data indicating that their locality has higher rates of single parent families, unemployment, and crime when compared to Queensland state averages (Department of Local Government and Planning, 2004; Queensland Police Service, 2004).

A positive finding to emerge from the data was that, despite low rates of trust and safety in the metropolitan community, children's rates of participation in community and neighbourhood connections were significantly higher in other communities. A likely explanation for these findings is the large number of available clubs and groups available to the city children compared to those in other localities and the close proximity of neighbours. The high levels of involvement in community-based groups and contact with neighbours are particularly encouraging in this community then, as they may help to ameliorate the negative consequences of lack of trust and feelings of safety. As Stanton-Salazar (1997) and Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) would maintain, it is communities such as these with high concentrations of poverty in which school success depends upon social capital.

Although related to social capital, sense of community refers more to the psychological or affective aspects underpinning attachment to a community or its inhabitants. Compared with social capital, the sense of community findings were more cohesive with two of the rural

communities, accounting for significantly higher scores on all four dimensions. Again, data from the rural 3 community were notable. Overall, these children very much liked their neighbourhood, were known to many neighbours, and cared what neighbours thought of them. They also had strong family and friend connections, trusted people, felt safe, and were tolerant of diversity.

Findings indicated that social capital and, to a lesser extent, sense of community appeared to be more a function of locality than of age. As reported earlier, there were only two differences according to age on the social capital dimensions – those relating to participation in community (as operationalised by club or group membership) and tolerance of diversity (as operationalised by a liking of people who are different). The finding that club membership among children increases with age was not unexpected, however, it was somewhat surprising and worrying that tolerance of others who are different declined with age. The age-related variances for two of the sense of community items were on the one hand logical and the other perplexing. Given their greater number of years in the neighbourhood, it was not unexpected that older children were more likely to report being known by neighbours. However, these children were also less concerned than the other children with what their neighbours thought of them. This suggests that these older children were less confirming or eager to please than their younger counterparts, perhaps due to a heightened sense of independence.

## CONCLUSION

The study drew attention to research showing that children, who have a strong sense of connection with their communities, supportive and varied social networks, feel safe and can trust those around them, are more likely to achieve success and stay on at school (Ainsworth, 2002; Fullan et al., 2003; Runyan, et al., 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). With this in mind, there are convincing arguments for the need to build children's social capital and an increasing awareness of the role that schools can play. Sanders (2003), for instance, suggests that schools can build social capital among students by increasing and intensifying their community connections. He explains that these connections need to be in the form of horizontal ties with the community that foster the social networks, educational and social opportunities and cultural richness that are central to social and economic wellbeing. Future research is needed therefore, to investigate how schools, communities and parents can cooperate to develop social capital for the benefit of children (Goddard, 2003). Further investigations are also needed into the ways in which sense of community impacts on schooling and how, it too, can be strengthened. Given the positive correlations found in this study between children's social capital, sense of community and self-reported wellbeing, research of this nature could have widespread implications.

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