Social Capital
And
Independent Schools

Key Words:

- Shared Values
- Norms for Social Conduct
- Mutual Support
- Networks
- Trust
- Tolerance
- Co-operation
- Engagement
- Participation
SOCIAL CAPITAL AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Introduction

In recent times AISSA staff have attended meetings where the term social capital has been mentioned. This term has become part of discussions within a broader context of the social inclusion policy initiatives of the South Australian State Government. Unfortunately in some situations allegations have been made that Independent schools cause a loss of social capital in some local communities.

Social capital has emerged as an area of considerable interest to those working in the development of social policy.

A brief literature search has been undertaken to obtain background information so that we can engage in the discussions with some understanding of the term and counter the negative perceptions being dispersed by the anti-non-government school lobby groups and some individuals across the State.

What is Social Capital?

There is no universally agreed definition of social capital.

The World Bank (1998) defines social capital as

“...the institutions, the relationships, the attitudes and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to the economic and social development. Social capital however is not simply the sum of institutions which underpin society. It is also the glue that holds them together. It includes the shared values and rules for social conduct expressed in personal relationships, trust and a common sense of ‘civic responsibility’ that makes society more than just a collection of individuals.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates social capital relates to:

- resources available within groups such as families, community, forums, social clubs
- the networks of mutual support, reciprocity, trust and obligation.

Social capital can be accumulated when people interact with other families, workplaces, neighborhoods, local associations and a range of informal and formal meetings.

The ABS uses the OECD definition of social capital. "...Networks, together with shared norms, values and understanding which facilitate cooperation within or among groups. The amalgam of ideas, assumptions, obligations and values which underpin these infrastructures and allow for a civil society are part of what is now being recognized as ‘social capital’.”

The NSW Benevolent Society sees social capital “...as providing the basis for a more effective response to people experiencing disadvantage and social isolation. It usually refers to the norms of trust, reciprocity and citizen participation.”

Underpinning the above elements are the values of trust, tolerance and mutual support among individuals and groups. Positive beliefs and values that facilitate social cooperation, tie social relations together and regulate or vitalize social order could also be considered social capital.
According to the Productivity Commission the benefits in developing social capital are

- Co-operation between groups
- Reducing the costs of conducting day-to-day affairs and doing business
- Facilitating the spread of knowledge and innovation
- Promoting cooperative and/or socially minded behaviour in situations where narrow self-interests alone do not generate good outcomes for society
- Creating civic and social engagement beyond the immediate family
- Providing benefits to the individual in terms of health, education and general well-being.

Partnership and participation are other key elements. In the later case it generates community involvement in institutions which impact on them (government, not-for-profit, commerce).

Low levels of social capital are said to generate inefficiency in the use of resources, inequalities within and across communities and disengagement from community activities.

Social capital can be accumulated or diminished. Increased awareness about the importance of education may lead to an overall increase in social capital; a loss of confidence in education institutions or a decrease in access for some members of the community to a service may result in a decline of social capital. The high cost of insurance premiums could lead to a loss of social capital because service clubs may not be able to afford the significant increase in costs, leading to a reduction of service or termination of the service.

Many of the benefits of social capital are non-monetary. A community with high levels of social capital will have trust among its citizens, respect and tolerance of difference and high levels of engagement in the community. Increased investment in education or increased involvement of volunteers in community service could increase social capital.

The Productivity Commission (Social Capital: Reviewing the Concept and its Policy, Implications, 2003) has explored how social capital considerations could be drawn more explicitly into the public policy process by assessing policies to build social capital, incorporating social capital considerations into policy assessments and redesigning policies to utilize existing stocks of social capital. The project in South Australia to increase school retention rates and engage young people at risk in education, training and/or employment is an example of a social policy that could enhance social capital. State government initiatives to build local partnerships between schools, industry and community services is a further example.

Various studies have concluded that social capital has generally diminished over the past three decades as a result of the implementation of a market approach to the delivery of community services, declining community engagement and the entrenchment of social disadvantage in some communities.
Limitations in the Use of the Term

Some social policy commentators have questioned the value of the label ‘social capital’ because it could be used to justify placing greater responsibility on individuals and communities for the care of disadvantaged groups, (e.g. the aged and infirm) with a view to withdrawing government responsibilities and to make budget savings.

The ambiguity of the term also limits its application and measurement.

Stephen Leeder (1998), Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney, stated:

“Thus while thoroughly endorsing the sentiment that lies behind social capital, especially its rendering explicit the importance of social context and its impact on both social and individual well-being and applauding the growing efforts to measure it and relate it to desirable social functions, I am not so sure that social capital is enough of an idea.”

Leeder also raises the issue of the difficulty in measuring social capital and therefore the risk of considering it the one true measure “...into which we can empty all that is complex and troubling and puzzling…”

There has not been a great deal written about what it means to apply the theory of social capital; i.e. social capital in practice. Many social policy experts acknowledge there needs to be more work undertaken to clearly define the term and to measure the outcomes.

How Independent Schools Contribute to Social Capital

Putting aside the difficulties with the definition and application of the terminology it is important the Independent sector engage in the debate about social inclusion and social capital and the development of social policy and related initiatives.

At the sector level government agencies and the government should acknowledge the Independent school sector authorities as legitimate partners (not observers) in the development of social inclusion initiatives and we should also accept our responsibility to participate and contribute to social policy development for the benefit of the wider community, (see AISSA Strategic Plan).

AISSA will be making representation to government to ensure students and their families have access to the services provided to enhance the involvement of young people enrolled at member schools in key education initiatives.

Schools are considered one of the key sources for the development of social capital. Anti-non-government school lobby groups allege that Independent schools create division in the community by catering for minority groups. AISSA contends that it is the former groups that generate division. In some cases their negative messages about non-government schools are linked to a deliberate strategy to exclude non-government school authorities and schools from projects and initiatives associated with strengthening links between the community and schools.

Member schools build social capital within their own communities through the development of networks among families and organizations within the local and international communities, and through the values that underpin the formal curriculum.
Students, staff and parents also contribute to the growth of social capital in the wider community. Schools encourage engagement of students in the local community. On a larger scale students are involved in community services at a local, state and international level.

**Families are seeking out non-government schools because they build a community, create a sense of belonging and engagement and value their participation in school activities.**

There are numerous examples that demonstrate how Independent schools contribute to the growth of social capital within the wider community. AISSA has established a project to collect examples of how Independent schools build a community and also engage in the wider community.

Government agencies do not have a monopoly in generating social capital. In fact it could be argued the increased state intervention creates an ethos of dependency on governments to solve community problems and a loss of engagement by citizens. It is one of the main reasons why leaders within the Independent sector are concerned about the greater intrusion of governments into the governance and management of non-government schools.

Member schools may wish to examine the words used to describe social capital in promoting their schools within their communities.

**The key message is: Independent schools do engage in the community and they do contribute to the key elements that underpin the growth of social capital.**

**References**


