ADVANCING THE FIELD

Midlothian Befrienders’ Cross-Generational Networking across the School Community Divide to Build Social Capital

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Social capital is a designer social science concept that is very much in academic and popular vogue. Indeed, in recent years there has been a proliferation of theoretical articles in academia lauding the veracity of social capital as a “silver bullet,” explain all, cure all phenomena. However, it seems that little work has been undertaken on linking the theory of social capital to work in practice in the field of community learning and development. This article aims to redress the balance in some way by offering an analysis of social capital in terms of a “work in progress” at an intergenerational school/seniors’ community project in Midlothian, Scotland, where the theory of social capital is informing practice and thinking of the staff of Midlothian Befrienders and vice versa.

KEYWORDS social capital, community development, intergenerational work, schools

INTRODUCTION

This short paper describes the history, application, and outcomes of a social capital initiative involving groups of senior school pupils and senior citizens in a community in Midlothian, Scotland, the United Kingdom, called the...
Midlothian Student Befrienders program. The paper begins by describing the work of the Midlothian cross generational Befrienders program and looks at the initiative through a social capital lens, examining how a voluntary sector/school partnership can develop learning and social capital in the community beyond the school gates. The paper explores how a lifelong learning and community development agenda can become a focal point of school and voluntary sector action within the context of building social capital. Finally, the paper signposts areas of potential future research that academics and practitioners in the social and educational field might want to pursue.

THE MIDLOTHIAN BEFRIENDERS PROGRAM: AN OVERVIEW

The Midlothian Befrienders project is an independent, voluntary organization that exists to help improve the quality of life of socially isolated people who have mental health issues by promoting a variety of supporting relationships. The Student Befriending Project started in August 2003 and involves school students who “befriend” socially isolated senior citizens with mental health issues. The program sought to demonstrate the benefits of supporting and encouraging young people as they prepare to leave school to look beyond the known confines of their family and friend network. It was hoped that by introducing them to a part of society that is often forgotten they would develop into young adults who can make thoughtful and positive contributions to their community as active citizens. Through this project, they not only reap benefits for themselves as sensitive and caring individuals, but they also help to support the clients with whom they spend time. The pilot started with a small group of sixth year students from Beeslack High School, Penicuik, befriending residents in local care homes living with dementia. The success of the first initiative led to the program being established in the school timetable as a social option for the final year students. The number of Midlothian care homes interested in the program subsequently increased to five, and the scope of the conditions of the clients expanded to include clients with Alzheimer’s and multiple sclerosis.

Currently, there are 39 student volunteers in the program. Of these, there are 25 students from Beeslack High School in Penicuik who are in their 6th year and 14 students from Lasswade High School, Bonnyrigg, who are in their 5th year. In August, 2008, Dalkeith High School will join the program, and in the course of the coming years it is expected that other Midlothian secondary schools will join the program.

The students started training in early September 2007 and were matched with the befriendedees in October. The students visited until the end of May 2008, with a time commitment of one hour per week throughout the academic year. The two schools involved allowed the students to carry out their visits during school time, demonstrating the commitments of the schools to the project.
Interestingly, the befriender base is broad and clients are living with a range of conditions, primarily Alzheimer’s, dementia, and multiple sclerosis. All are residents across five Midlothian care homes and are no longer able to live independently. The age range is from 45 to 96 years old.

Students visit in pairs or threes since the students often have no experience of communication with such a client base. This role is outside anything they may have previously encountered. The activities undertaken vary. Examples include reminiscing; playing dominoes, poker, bingo, or snap; looking at magazines or books about past interests; making cards for Christmas; support to build a Bebo; Web research for an English General Certificate of Secondary Education; and, most important, conversation. Some students feel more comfortable with organized activities while others are more spontaneous. They have learned that giving some thought prior to a visit about an activity or what to talk about is very helpful. All participants are encouraged and supported to set their own levels of interaction.

The Youth Support Worker from Midlothian Befrienders visits the students at the care homes every week and checks for unresolved issues; for example, if a match is not working or a befriender is no longer well enough for visits. In addition, the students are closely supported by care home staff who are very positive about the benefits the program provides each of the befriendees.

This academic year, the staff of Midlothian Befrienders has spent some time preparing students for their volunteering experience through a series of training modules covering aspects of befriending, the first meeting, boundaries, and confidentiality. On completion of the training, the students’ feedback showed that they also wanted first aid training and talks by care home staff involved in daily care of the befriendees and also from associated health professionals. These requests demonstrate the seriousness with which students took their roles and how important training was to them both for this role and for future learning. Their suggestions will be integrated into next year’s training program as per reflective practice.

What does the student derive from this volunteering experience?

- The volunteer learns many new skills. One of the most significant being that of communication, especially with older generations. Students often find themselves out of their comfort zone. They appreciate quickly the importance of different ways of communicating, which is particularly evident when the client is in the later stages of multiple sclerosis or Alzheimer’s.

- Students are made (more) aware of a part of society that is hidden away from the public eye: a forgotten community within their own. They see the life their befriendees live, the people on whom they depend, and, in some cases, how their befriendees’ condition affects the family. Therefore, they are encouraged to think beyond themselves and their immediate families and to look to the wider community in which they live.
• Schools and educational authorities are increasingly familiar with the concept of “resilience.” It is hoped that this volunteering experience will equip those involved with tools that can be used to help them cope with future challenges and changes in their lives. The students are more likely to recognize and understand the feelings of others, believe in their own self-worth, and understand and be able to form and maintain relationships with others that are meaningful and mutually respectful and have, as a result, the ability to set goals for future life.
• The role they fulfill earns them vital points on university applications and references for job applications. In addition, it helps to clarify choices about future study and careers.
• In addition, other benefits to the students are feelings of self-worth and that they are making a difference, contributing to society, feeling responsible, helping others through helping themselves, and having their opinions listened to and acted on (e.g., training). In one case, a volunteer has for the first time taken the initiative about an activity when going into the care home and has seen his fellow students follow his lead. The benefit to this student is immeasurable.

A student, referred to here as Robert, is an example of how the program benefits those from all levels of achievement. He is not an “academic” student and his studies adviser at school doubted whether he would go beyond the training stage for befriending. However, he has found that he has an aptitude for this role, taking pride in the in the fact that he has never missed a session. He communicates well with staff in the care home and organizes the activities that he and his other team members will undertake with the clients. In doing so, he has become the group’s leader, ensuring, for example, that all clients in the home have volunteers available to them even when students are ill. The once quiet boy now talks with confidence and fluency about his future plans. Thus, students finding it hard to make potential career and educational choices often find the volunteering opportunity a time when they can reflect on their futures. The school can further support students at this point in the decision making process.

Benefits for the Befriendee

• The befriendees undoubtedly benefits from the visits they receive from students. Some perceive that they have a role to increase the students’ understandings of their lives, and others see that they have to be there for the students as they are making an effort to visit them.
• For those with dementia, they have the pleasure of being able to talk about the past, which they often find easier to recall than more recent events.
• There are some who have either no relatives or at least none who live close enough to visit, and, for them, the weekly visit from the volunteers is that much more significant.
• Befriendees have something to look forward to, meeting someone who is not a carer or health professional.
• Some feel better emotionally, and, in one case, the befriended came off of a suicide watch as his levels of depression became more manageable. One can never underestimate the benefits of a supporting relationship.

The Care Home

• The staff from the care homes involved have testified to direct benefits from the students’ visits. The residents as a whole enjoy seeing young people in the building who stop and talk.

The Families

• The families of the befriended welcome the respite from visiting all the time as they have the reassurance of a person calling to see their relative on a particular day.
• Students’ families, in some cases, drop children at the care home; they are actively supporting and encouraging them to be involved in this role.

The Schools

• The participating schools have benefited because they are able to extend a number of social options to their students, and the positive publicity concerning the project reflects well on the school in the wider community. Moreover, the program has also encouraged further contacts between the care homes and schools through tea parties, Christmas parties, and school choir visits. The schools are involved on many levels.

The next section moves on to consider how social capital theory can link to practice in the field. It offers a brief resume of social capital thinking and highlights how Midlothian Befrienders and staff are consciously embracing a social capital approach in regard to their work.

SOCIAL CAPITAL: LINKING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Midlothian Befrienders staff have consciously incorporated social capital thinking into their practice. Staff have attended workshops on social capital
as part of their continuing professional development and have brought lessons learned to their work and programmed outcomes. How does social capital link into the work of Midlothian Befrienders?

Social capital revolves on the notion that relationships and social networks are assets that allow people to build communities, knit social fabric, and commit to one another. Social networks and a sense of belonging can bring positive benefits. Indeed, it is asserted that where high levels of social capital are catalyzed, communities are healthier and more socially and economically successful than communities where there are low levels of social capital.

Social capital theorists all concur that if social capital is about anything, it relates to networks of people, community development, civic engagement, neighborliness, and a range of social connections and social networks that allow us to benefit in some way through reciprocity and achievement of mutual goals. In essence, social capital is about how people can derive resources from relationships with others. Clearly, in this context, the Student Befrienders program is developing social capital; it is about relationships, networking, and developing a sense of belonging between the young and the not so young. The social capital comes, in part, from the everyday contact between the people involved who are forming and developing social connections and networks based on trust, shared values, and reciprocity (“give and take”). Social capital relates very much to networks of social ties, social networks, “the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Field, 2005, p.15).

American sociologist James Coleman looks at social capital within marginalized communities, focusing on notions of reciprocity, relationships between adults and children, community norms, trust, and shared values, especially between family relations and in community organizations. Coleman emphasizes the importance of social networks, trust, social environment, community norms, relationships, and social networks and social interactions. Essentially, as Woodcock and Narayan (2000) note, “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 crisis, enjoyed for its own sake, and leveraged material gain” (p. 226).

It should also be noted that social capital has various component dimensions, namely “bridging,” “bonding,” and “linking” (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Here, bonding social capital is community superglue characterized by strong bonds among group members such as a staff team, developing a strong sense of solidarity, shared identity, and security among members. Bridging social capital is “good for getting by,” a lubricant, a resource to assist people in generating relationships with a wider group of people than their immediate groups or environments. Finally, linking social capital relates to being outward in looking across diverse social cleavages.
Seaman and Sweeting (2004) produced a qualitative study on young people’s transitions into adulthood and access to social capital in families, establishing that “young people can be identified as a resource in the development of community level social capital” (p. 173). This finding contrasts with existing work (Morrow, 2002) that conceptually characterizes young people as consumers of social capital and not producers. However, standard quantitative measures of social capital tend to indicate that “young people are less likely to participate in social and civic activities. Young people are less likely to vote, less likely to be involved in their local community and less likely to undertake formal voluntary work” (Whiting & Harper, 2003, p. 1). Midlothian Befrienders, through their endeavors, have turned this finding on its head.

In terms of a social capital approach, the Midlothian Student Befrienders program meets a range of social capital goals and potential outcomes:

• The project encourages pupils to develop their citizenship skills as befrienders, supporting pupils to become leaders and empowering them to take forward initiatives in the community, “linking social capital.”
• The program provides young people with opportunities to fulfill their potential and to make positive contributions to their communities, thus, promoting “social” as opposed to antisocial behavior, a by-product of “intergenerational closure,” which, at the very least, makes a perceived contribution to positive stocks of social capital (Coleman, 1988).
• The volunteering program, as a high indicator of social capital, encourages students to involve themselves in decision making, seeking opportunities for community involvement; broadening pupil’s learning, experiences, and achievements; and increasing their awareness of where they fit into and bond with the community.
• Student leadership develops the capacities of students to broaden their experiences, develops confidence, and the students are perceived as role models by younger students, thus, in effect and fact, becoming champions of social capital in an extended network. Increasing numbers of students participating in community affairs/activities would be indicative of an increase in social capital as would be an increase in numbers of participants in the “network.”
• Young people engage and connect with older people who become non-resident parent-type role models, building on the strengths of people, young and old in their community, “linking social capital.”
• Social networks and social support: Contact and support between people is an important source of social capital. Shared identities develop and different types of exchanges within the network emerge.
• Young people and older people develop relationships based on the two fundamental components of social capital: reciprocity and trust, a willingness to cooperate with each other for mutual benefit and a clear source of social capital.
• Achievement through learning for young people through community engagement and bonding with older people encourages “supportive ties” and “trusting connections,” “bonding social capital.”

• Promoting the corporate image of the school in the community promotes the “linking” of the school with the wider community.

• Developing “trusting attachments” and what Coleman (1988, p. 111) terms “intergenerational closure,” encourages older and younger people to communicate and share standards.

• Students develop confidence at a transition point between school and postschool worlds of employment or higher education; working with older people is having a positive impact on the educational and employment destinations and outcomes of the students.

• Increase in the sense of community and community well-being makes people feel safer, more secure and valued, which an indicator of a rise in social capital.

CONCLUSION: DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPITAL BEYOND THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY DIVIDE

The Midlothian Student Befrienders program is one that is clearly catalyzing social capital and, thereby, increasing student achievement through community involvement and simultaneously social improvement in the lot of seniors. The program demonstrates that education and learning can take place beyond the educational institution of school, beyond the school gate, and in the community.

While the program exhibits many of the characteristics of social capital building, the staff of Midlothian befrienders themselves has consciously integrated social capital thinking into their reflective working practice and are enthusiastic about understanding how a social capital approach can enrich their work and the volunteering experience of the students. Indeed, the staff have attended social capital workshops, and Midlothian Befrienders as an organization has signed up to actively participate in the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS), an “open source” collaborative, academic consortium that links academia to practical capacity building and social capital work in society. While the primary focus of the AERS network is that of schools and school education, inclusive case studies that revolve around the theme of social capital, the school, and the community are encouraged with a view to such work influencing national policies in the future.

In addition, the students are developing social networks involving older people and themselves, and through ongoing communication, dialogue, developing trust, and reciprocity they are bringing educational and social benefits to their community. Clearly, young people learn in school, but the challenge for educators and community workers is to extend learning
and leadership into the community arena beyond the educational institution and organization.

The challenge for the Student Befrienders program in the future is, of course, to convince other schools and partners to join the program and to direct the initiative toward the next strategical, developmental, and practical level. Presently (September 2008), 44 pupils have signed up for the befriending program for the 2008–2009 academic year. Moreover, Midlothian Befrienders has developed its range of social partners to include working with Volunteering Centre Midlothian and Midlothian Training Services with a view to extending the cross generational program to include youngsters who are classified as requiring More Chances, More Choices (MCMC). The key elements of the forthcoming MCMC program include the following:

- A determination to expand existing good practice
- A commitment to developing the social and practical capacities of young people on the margins of society
- A desire to signpost directions and open up roads to learning, training, and employment for disaffected young people
- A belief that befriending can catalyze personal development in which the young participants can become more confident, feel better about themselves, and be able to see how they can contribute to their community for the better
- A resolve to encourage young people to make links with other people in their community and build positive working relationships with them
- A drive to develop social capital by developing volunteering opportunities and community based activities that develop higher levels of trust, cooperation, and reciprocity among unlikely counterparts.

Interestingly, West-Brunham and Otero (2004) assert that school leaders need to be growing social capital by broadening their missions from that of merely classroom performance to that of consideration of social and community functions. They argue that schools can be harbingers of “community leadership” by improving school relationships across the school community divide and the Midlothian Befrienders initiative corroborates their findings. Research on intergenerational learning and social capital in the UK strongly suggests that intergenerational approaches can catalyze community capacity and social capital through the creation of new community networks and support systems (Granville, 2002; Kaplan, 2001). Additionally, (Kerka, 2003) intergenerational social capital frameworks are effective in “reducing stereotypes of young and old and improving mutual understanding and trust” (p. 2). Such an approach, inferred or factual, also brings intergenerational learning through cultivation of values of mutual respect, trust, and reciprocity of working together. Here, attitudinal change is a positive outcome, even if it is a short-term phenomenon.
Of course, there are research limitations associated with our work in Midlothian, and there is clearly a challenge to develop a more in-depth, critically constructed piece of research, which is something the authors are presently undertaking. In the meantime, the authors hope to have served up an interesting piece of evolving research that feeds a hunger to understand how social capital can be harnessed to cross the school community divide.

NOTES

1. Midlothian, Scotland, near Edinburgh, is a metropolitan, regional area with a population of 80,000 people, covering 140 square miles.
2. AERS (www.aers.org.uk), which was established in 2004, is a two million pound, five-year program funded by the Scottish government and the Scottish Funding Council.

REFERENCES
