

## **Building social capital in professional learning communities: Importance, challenges and a way forward**

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### **Introduction: What is social capital?**

The idea of social capital has enjoyed a remarkable rise to prominence. By treating social relationships as a form of capital, it proposes that they are a resource, which people can then draw on to achieve their goals. It also serves alongside other forms of capital (such as economic, human, cultural, identity, and intellectual) as one possible resource and accepted contributor to our individual, community and national wellbeing. International bodies such as UNESCO, OECD and World Bank have engaged in extensive conceptual, empirical and policy related work in the area and a number of web sites are devoted entirely to the area.<sup>1</sup>

What do we mean by ‘social capital’? In a recent analysis of contemporary academic literature in the area, the World Bank (Grootaert, et al, 2004) found that social capital has been discussed in two related but different ways. The first approach was subjective or cognitive in nature and referred to the resources (such as information, ideas, support) that individuals were able to procure by virtue of their relationships with other people. The second approach was structural in nature and referred to the type and extent of one’s involvement in various informal networks and formal civic organisations. Despite these differences, the World Bank (Grootaert, et al, 2004, p. 3) concludes that social capital “is most frequently defined in terms of the groups, networks, norms, and trust that people have available to them for productive purposes”.

As well as this generally accepted definition, Grootaert et al (2004, p. 4) point out that common distinctions are made among ‘bonding’, ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ forms social capital. ‘Bonding’ social capital refers to “ties to people who are similar in terms of their demographic characteristics, such as family members, neighbours, close friends and work colleagues”. ‘Bridging’ social capital is also horizontal in nature but refers to “ties to people who do not share many of these characteristics”. However, it continues to connect “people with more or less equal social standing”. ‘Linking’ social capital operates across power differentials and thus is seen vertical in nature. It refers to “one’s ties to people in positions of authority such as representatives of public (police, political parties) and private (banks) institutions”.

Knowing the definition of social capital and its different forms is helpful, but it does little to assist us with the challenges in building social capital in professional learning communities in schools. In addressing this task, the chapter concentrates on the three different forms of social capital, their importance and the challenges involved in achieving each. Bonding social capital is interpreted as that occurring among work

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<sup>1</sup> E.g.: <http://www.socialcapitalgateway.org/>

colleagues within schools. It is the most developed area in the research literature. Bridging social capital is taken as that occurring between schools. This area is a recent but growing one in the research literature, especially in the area of networking. An example of this research is provided. Linking social capital is understood as that occurring between a school and its community. While there is a long research tradition in this area it tends to be unidirectional, concentrating on what the community can do for the school, rather than the other way around. An example of research examining schools' contribution to the social capital of their wider communities is outlined. The chapter concludes with a summary of the importance of, and challenges in developing, the three forms of social capital and, arising from this material, a way forward. This way forward involves those in schools seeing their task as developmental, *starting* with the building of social capital.

### **Three forms of social capital in schools: Their importance and challenges**

#### **Bonding social capital: Within schools**

Being a valued part of a group is important for all those in schools. In what follows, the importance and challenges of bonding social capital for students, teachers and school leaders are examined.

- **Students**

Following the seminal work of Coleman (1994) on educational attainment, cognitive development and self-identity in American ghettos, the OECD (2004, p. 127) has concluded that a general sense of belonging at school is so important for student educational, economic, social, health, and wellbeing success that it should be treated equally as an outcome of schooling as academic results. Recent research supports this argument. In a rare large-scale longitudinal study, Feinstein (2000, p. 20) found that pupil peer relations, locus of control and self-concept were related to later life successes, such as employment and earnings. At a more general level, Field (2005) found that people's social relationships play a vital role in their capacity for learning.

Research also links within school social capital to student academic results. The OECD's (2004) PISA study, for example, has linked student-teacher relations and performance in mathematics. Beatty and Brew (2005) found that the impact of teacher support on academic engagement acted through student confidence in school and a sense of belonging. In other words, students' sense of relatedness with school mediated their academic engagement. Hogan and Donovan (2005) found significant relationships between students' subjective agency and academic outcomes (based on student grades in all subjects at the end of grades eight and eleven) and a range of social capital outcomes such as sociability, trust in others, collaboration, being a good student, and participation in community groups.

However, Beatty and Brew (2005) worry that, despite its importance, student sense of connectedness with school can easily be eclipsed by a preoccupation with

performance outcomes and test-focused teaching. Like the OECD, Hogan and Donovan (2005, p. 100) believe that not to measure such broader outcomes of schooling “underestimates the net contribution that schools make to individual wellbeing and aggregate social utility and permits a highly stratified and limited measure of school performance, academic achievement, to monopolise the ‘allocation’ of students into social division of labour”. They conclude that this situation is neither sensible, efficient nor defensible on social justice grounds.

In brief, then, research makes clear how important groups, networks, norms, and trust (in other words, bonding social capital) can be, not only for student feelings of self worth, day-by-day enjoyment of school and academic results, but also for their later life chances. The research identifies ways in which this might be achieved encouraging teachers to work on student confidence in school, sense of belonging, locus of control and peer relations, as well as their own relationships with the students. Finally, the research identifies some of the challenges involved, including system preoccupation with a highly stratified and limited measure of school performance, that is, academic achievement, performance outcomes and test focussed teaching.

- **Staff**

#### Teachers

To succeed in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world, it is vital that schools grow, develop, adapt and take charge of change so that they can control their own futures (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). Stoll et al (2003) argue that teachers and schools that are able to take charge, to be empowered rather than be controlled by what is going on around them, have been shown to be more effective and improve more rapidly than ones that are not. Others have shown that teacher empowerment increases not only the quality of decisions, teachers’ work lives, commitment and instructional practice (Somech, 2002) but also students’ academic achievement (Marks & Seashore Louis, 1997).

Several studies have documented a strong link between collective teacher efficacy (CTE), the shared beliefs of capability that the efforts of staff as a whole will have a positive effect on students, and differences in student achievement (Mawhinney et al, 2005; Ross et al, 2004). Bandura (1993) and Goddard et al (2004) have even demonstrated that the effects of CTE on student achievement were stronger than the direct link between SES and student achievement.

Goddard (2002) has also found that where teachers have the opportunity to influence important school decisions, they also tend to have stronger beliefs in the co-joint capability of their staff. Seashore Louis et al’s (2005, p. 198, emphasis in original) research on teacher collective sense making in a time of increased regulation of the curriculum found that it “was directly related to their willingness and propensity to change” and that it “involved developing an understanding or interpretation of the meaning of *professional control and responsibility*”.

Mawhinney et al (2005) recently sought to better understand how under pressures of accountability, districts are undertaking research to support their development of

strategic actions to foster organisational learning in schools; as well as examine the relationships among perceived conditions of professional learning, teachers' collective efficacy beliefs and student achievement. They found collective efficacy preceded professional learning communities. This finding raises the relevance of earlier research on the stages of group (staff) development (Mulford et al, 2004). At the first or forming stage, group members are polite, they avoid conflict, and they are concerned about being accepted or rejected. At the second stage, storming, group members become involved in conflict because of concern about status, power and organisation. The third stage, norming, sees more cohesion between members as there is more affection, open-mindedness and a willingness to share. However, pressures to conform to the group ('groupthink') may detract from the task at hand. Next comes the performing stage, or work stage. It is characterized by an increase in task orientation and an open exchange of feedback. The next stage is transforming. This stage represents a refinement of the performing stage. It indicates that the group does not just continue performing the same tasks well, that it learns from feedback about those tasks and how they are undertaking them and, if necessary, changes the tasks and/or the methods of achieving them. There can also be a dorming stage that interacts with the performing and transforming stages. It is the time for "pulling back on the oars," for resting and recuperating, for letting the momentum of success allow the group to "coast". Dorming helps to prevent group and/or individual burnout. Finally, there is a mourning stage, which can occur after whichever of the stages the group has reached and is triggered by the impending dissolution of the group. At this stage members reassert their independence from the group and start to disengage.

In the first study of its kind, Wheelan and Tilin (1999) examined relationships between teacher perceptions of staff group effectiveness and development and actual levels of productivity. A survey was employed to measure group development and data was gathered on student grades, standardised test scores and degree of parental involvement. The survey instrument contained four scales designed to correspond to the first four stages of group development, dependency (forming), conflict (storming), trust (norming), and work (performing). Wheelan and Tilin (1999, p. 77) found "significant relationships between ... group development level and maths rank, reading rank and total achievement rank (a combination of maths and reading)". Staff in schools classified as high in reading and total rank had significantly lower scores on conflict and significantly higher scores on trust and structure and work. In addition, those high on trust and structure and work also reported higher levels of parental involvement.

But not all may benefit from team bonding social capital. Blasé and Blasé (1999) argue that as schools become more collaborative, collegial and democratic, they become more political. Blackmore (1995) agrees viewing discourses of collaboration as little more than rhetoric, given constraining practices of hierarchically organised education systems. O'Neill (2000, p. 19) maintains that while teacher collaboration is accepted as uncontroversial and likely to attract universal endorsement, in effect it may be employed by secondary school heads of department to get staff "to do things they really don't want to do". This is what Hargreaves (1991) termed 'contrived congeniality'. Achinstein (2002) warns that when teachers enact collaborative reforms in the name of 'community', what emerges is often conflict. But he also argues that conflict is central to an effective community. How teachers manage conflicts, whether they suppress or embrace their differences, may help define the

community borders and ultimately the potential for organisational learning and change.

Johnson (2003) found over 85% of teachers in his study reported working collaboratively in teams to 'some extent' or a 'great deal'. The perceived advantages of collaboration were seen to be increased moral support, morale and teacher learning. However, a minority of teachers were found to be negative about the new teaming arrangements claiming that the changes had led to an increase in their workloads, a loss of professional autonomy, and the emergence of damaging competition between teams for resources, recognition and power. Johnson (2003, p. 349) concludes that, "The study offers a timely reminder that even with school reforms which seem benevolently 'good' and almost universally accepted, it is likely that some groups and individuals will be silenced and marginalised, and that their professional standing will be compromised".

Despite these challenges to bonding social capital in schools, we need to take note of the research indicating that variation in performance within schools is four times as great as variation in performance between schools (OECD, 2000). Given this finding, it makes sense to ensure that the practice of the most effective teachers is used to support and develop the work of others. Twenty-four U.K. schools belonging to the NCSL's Leadership Network (Connor, 2005) recently explored this issue. As the project progressed, four themes emerged that schools were applying as a means of reducing variation, themes that can be seen to include facets of bonding social capital:

- the collection, analysis, interpretation, and use of data;
- the development of strategies that focus on teacher learning through, for example, the focused observation of specific aspects of practice;
- proposals for curriculum reform, especially to relate it more closely to the interests of learners and their learning preferences; and,
- a focus on the development of middle leaders and learning from the innovative practice of others in the school.

Part of within school variation can, as the recent OECD (2005) report *Teachers Matter* points out, can be created growing teacher shortages. Part of this shortage results from the high drop out of teachers in the first few years in the job (up to 50% over the first three years). Researchers have started to explore at why this might be so and what might be done to improve the situation. For example, Moore Johnston (2003) has found that the successful schools hire through an information-rich process that ensures a good match and purposefully engage new teachers in the culture and practices of the school, beginning with their first encounter and continuing in induction. The successful school also provides ongoing curricular and collegial support and acknowledgement.

The importance of bonding social capital for teachers has clearly been illustrated. Collective efficacy has even been shown to be precursor to a professional learning community. However, a number of factors have also been found to challenge the development of bonding social capital, such as professional autonomy, the inevitability of conflict, the fact that not everyone benefits, its use for political purposes, the stage of staff development and the possibility of groupthink, accountability press and a lack of school ownership or control over its actions. The

type of school (high poverty, secondary) and the pressure of high stakes testing could also act as challenges.

### Leaders

In summarising the research on effective school leadership (NCSL, 2005a, p. 5), note has been made of the need for leaders to develop people and to be person-centred, “putting a premium on professional relationships, and build trust and collaborative ways of working throughout the school.” Leithwood’s (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Leithwood et al, 2004) reviews of the research literature in the field have found that mostly leaders contribute to student learning indirectly, through their influence on other people or features of their organisation. Thus their success will depend a great deal on their judicious choice of which parts of the organization to spend time and attention on. Identifying what should take primacy for leaders is certainly an important issue – which knowledge, dispositions, or performances have a greater impact on student learning than others. It is clear in the growing number of sets of school leader standards (for example, the USA Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) place a heavy emphasis on interpersonal skills.

Scribner et al (2002) found that professional autonomy and attention to individual needs are necessary and salient conditions of strong professional communities. What Scribner et al (2002) adds to our understanding of this situation is that the principal is an indispensable arbiter of the tension between the two. Marks and Printy (2004, p. 370) conclude that transformational leadership (building organisational capacity) was found to be a necessary but insufficient condition for instructional leadership (individual and collective competence) but when “transformational and shared instructional leadership coexists in an integrated form of leadership, the influence on school performance, measured by the quality of its pedagogy and the achievement of its students, is substantial”.

Confirming and building on these mainly North American reviews and research, evidence from other countries (e.g., Mulford et al, 2004) clearly demonstrates that leadership that makes a difference is both position based (principal) and distributive (administrative team and teachers). But, agreeing with Leithwood, both are only indirectly related to student outcomes. Organisational learning (OL) involving three sequential development stages (trusting and collaborative climate, shared and monitored mission and taking initiatives and risks) supported by appropriate professional development is the important intervening variable between leadership and teacher work and then student outcomes. That is, leadership contributes to OL, which in turn influences what happens in the core business of the school - the teaching and learning. It influences the way students perceive teachers organise and conduct their instruction, and their educational interactions with, and expectations for, their students. Pupils’ positive perceptions of teachers’ work directly promote their participation in school, academic self-concept and engagement with school. Pupil participation is directly and pupil engagement indirectly (through retention) related to academic achievement. School size is negatively and socio-economic status and, especially, student home educational environment are positively linked to these relationships. Other research confirms this developmental sequence (see, for example: Mohr & Dichter, 2001; Mitchell & Sackney, 1998) and experience in the field of professional development also suggests that training in team skills and staff

collaboration is connected with outcomes, including student achievement (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Little, 1982).

The above research clearly underscores the importance of the school leader for within school bonding social capital. It also makes clear that bonding social capital is not the end of the matter for organisational learning or a professional learning community; it needs to be used for something, such as the mission of the school, curriculum and instruction. Other challenges to bonding social capital formation could be identified as the need to build staff capacity and competence, school size and socio-economic status, and student home educational environment.

### **Bridging social capital: Among schools**

Hopkins (NCSL, 2005b, p. 7) argues that “traditional levers for improvement, such as tests and targets, are reaching the limits of their potential and the next phase of education reform will require new ways of delivering ‘excellence and equity’” and that “Networks [among schools] are perhaps the best way we have at present to create and support this expectation.” Leadbeater (2005, p. 6) argues that personalised learning<sup>2</sup> “will only become reality when schools become much more networked, collaborating not only with other schools, but with families, community groups and other public agencies”. But Leadbeater (2005, p. 22) also indicates that collaboration “can be held back by regulation, inspection and funding regimes that encourage schools to think of themselves as autonomous, stand alone units”.

In a world-wide research study summarising the findings from productive private sector network arrangements, Kanter (1994) identified three fundamental aspects of such alliances:

- they must yield benefits for the partners, but they must also have significance beyond corporate advantage;
- networks that partners ultimately deem successful involve collaboration; and,
- they cannot be ‘controlled’ by the formal system.

Similar results have recently been found by one of arguably the best funded and continuous school networks, The Network Learning Group (NLG), with its hub at the UK’s NCSL (see Jackson’s chapter in this book).

Two NLG developers, Holmes and Johns-Shepherd (NCSL, 2005b) have examined how school networks have grown and change over time. The five key activities of courting, aligning, connecting, embedding, and re-focusing were found to characterise to varying degrees as the network developed from its early days, to an emerging, mature, and disengaged or renewed network. It was found, for example, that in the early days courting and aligning activities dominated and then, as the network emerged, the focus shifted to aligning and connecting. Courting involved getting people on board, building consensus and trust around a compelling idea and securing commitment. Aligning involved using the established trust to set parameters for

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<sup>2</sup> Personalised learning, a ‘hot’ topic in English education (Leadbeater, 2005, p. 7), “means engaging learners in a highly interactive process of learning ... Learning comes through interaction in which the learner discovers for themselves, reflects on what they have learned and how. ... [It] has to be co-created between learner and teacher.”

collaboration, establishing working groups and securing resources and connecting involved creating a critical mass of enthusiasts to participate fully in the network, modelling some of the processes, uniting the senior leaders around the purposes, and encouraging low-risk, quickly won activities to start.

The above research underscores the importance of bridging social capital. But, again, the advice is that the social capital constitutes the starting point, a necessary but insufficient condition for effective networks. There is a need to use it to develop an agreed set of priorities, a plan and a structure to sustain the network. Challenges to networks could include the hard work and commitment involved, the required base of relationships and shared values, naturally occurring variances such as changes in leaders, the shifting focus as networks develop, and external pressures.

### **Linking social capital: Between the school and its community**

While there is a long research tradition in the school-community area it tends to be unidirectional, concentrating on what the community can do for the school, rather than being multidirectional. Yet schools play a vital role in strengthening linkages within their communities by providing opportunities for interaction and networking, which, in turn, contribute to the community's well-being and social cohesion. The close links between the survival and development of schools and their communities are demonstrated by a number of researchers (Jolly & Deloney 1996), who provide evidence, for example, that many rural communities have failed to remain viable after losing their school.

An Australian research project (Kilpatrick et al, 2001) confirms this importance. The project examined the extent and nature of the contribution of rural schools to their communities' development beyond traditional forms of education of young people and the ways in which leadership influenced the process. Kilpatrick et al (2001) found that rural school community partnerships delivered a variety of positive outcomes for youth and for the community, including the provision of training that meets both student and community needs, improved school and community retention and positive environmental, cultural, recreational and economic outcomes. Whilst these tangible outcomes are important to the sustainability of many small rural communities, the potentially more valuable outcome from was increased individual and community capacity to influence their own futures.

Effective leadership for school–community partnerships was found to be a collective process consisting of five stages: trigger, initiation, development, maintenance, and sustainability. As well, Kilpatrick et al (2001) found 12 indicators of effective school community partnerships. Underscoring all these indicators was the importance of collective learning activities including teamwork and network building, in other words, linking social capital.

The indicators are largely sequential in that later indicators build on earlier ones<sup>3</sup>:

- School Principals are committed to fostering increased integration between school and community;

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<sup>3</sup> The similarities with the lessons learned in the NLG are worth noting.



- School has in-depth knowledge of the community and resources available;
- School actively seeks opportunities to involve all sectors of the community, including boundary crossers, and those who would not normally have contact with the school;
- School has a high level of awareness of the value and importance to school–community partnerships of good public relations;
- School Principals display a transformational leadership style which empowers others within the school and community and facilitates collective visioning;
- School and community have access to and utilise extensive internal and external networks;
- School and community share a vision for the future, centred on their youth;
- School and community are open to new ideas, willing to take risks and willing to mould opportunities to match their vision;
- School and community together play an active, meaningful and purposeful role in school decision making;
- School and community value the skills of all in contributing to the learning of all;
- Leadership for school–community partnerships is seen as the collective responsibility of school and community; and,
- School and community both view the school as a learning centre for the whole community, which brings together physical, human and social capital resources.

The importance of linking social capital from the school with its community is high, especially where it results in that community's capacity to influence its own future. But, as with the bonding and bridging social capital, there are challenges. These challenges include moving from a looser structure and more informal relationships in the earlier stages to a tighter structure and more formalised relationships in later planning and delivery, the need for different leadership roles at different stages and for leadership to become increasingly distributed. As Henton, et al (1995) point out, it seems unlikely one person would be skilled in all roles.

## **Conclusion: Summary of the importance of and challenges to social capital and a way forward**

### **Summary: Importance of and challenges to social capital**

The research evidence reviewed in this chapter is clear in its strong support for all three forms of social capital. The outcomes are impressive, not the least of which being improved student engagement, academic performance and later life chances, improved teaching and learning, reduced within school variation and retention of teachers in the profession, and increased individual and community capacity to influence their own futures.

But there are many challenges to overcome at the contextual, organisational and individual levels including the current accountability press, especially system preoccupation with a limited number of academic performance outcomes, the micro politics of schools such as contrived collegiality, groupthink and conflict avoidance, differences between policy development and its implementation, dedicated leadership,

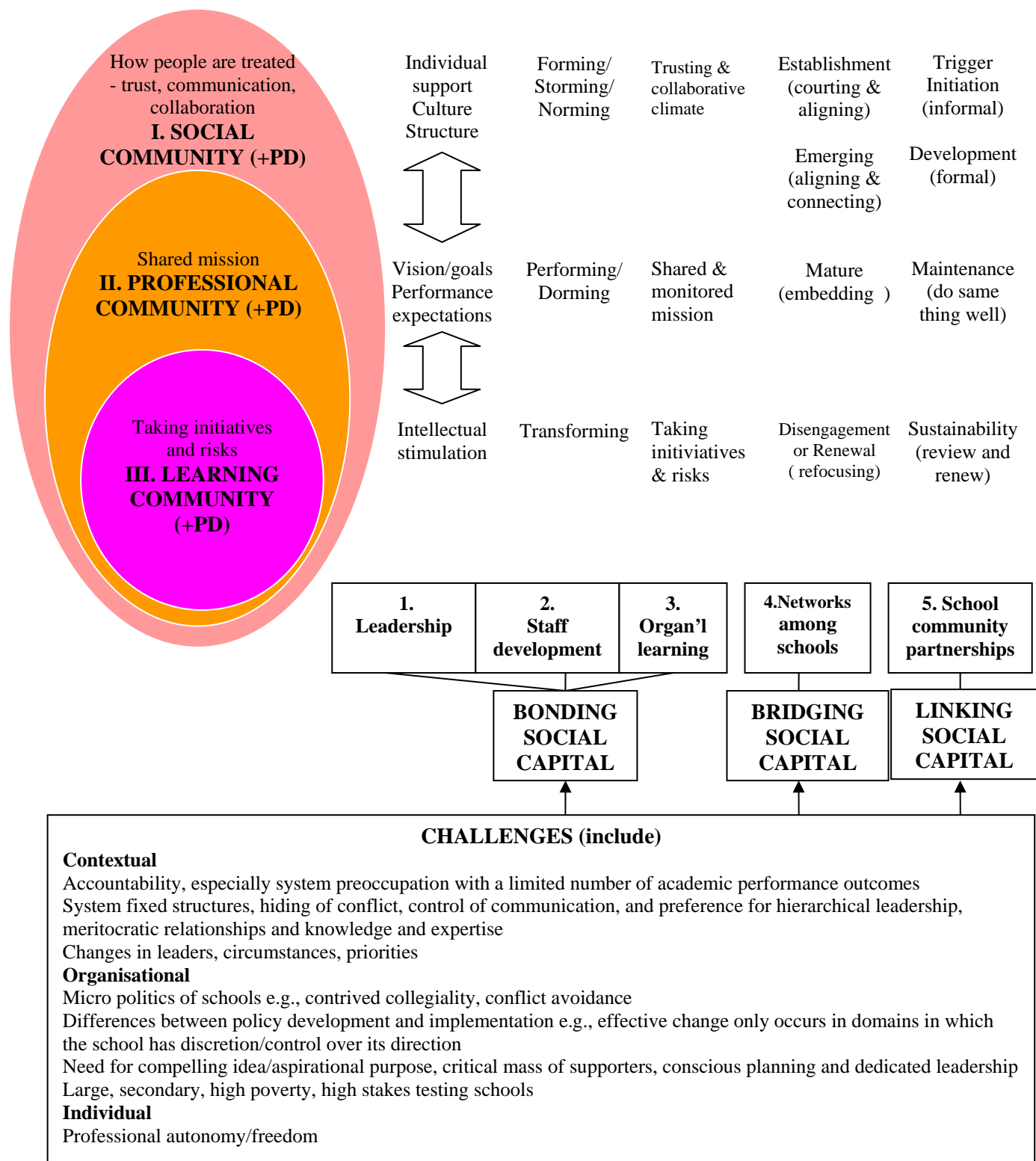
large, secondary, high poverty schools, and professional autonomy. Some of these challenges are summarised in the following diagram.

### **A way forward**

Where do we take this research evidence on the importance of and challenges to social capital? I believe a way forward is to see the task of establishing professional learning communities as developmental *starting* with the building of social capital (see the following diagram). A message arising from the research in this chapter is that those in schools must learn how to lose time in order to gain time. Awareness of, and skill development in group and organisational processes is a first step in any effective change. Instead of others trying to insert something into a school's (or community's) culture, the school, and especially its leadership, should first be trying to help that culture develop an awareness of and a responsiveness to itself.

Development can be seen in the research reviewed showing teacher collective efficacy preceding professional learning communities, the forming, storming, norming, performing, transforming, dorming and mourning stages of staff development (see column 2 in the diagram), the trusting and collaborative climate, shared and monitored mission and taking initiatives and risks stages of organisational learning (column 3), the establishment, emerging, mature and disengagement or renewal stages of school networks (column 4), and the trigger, initiation, development, maintenance, and sustainability stages of school community partnerships (column 5). Elsewhere I (Mulford, 2003) have conceptualised the factors that make up school principal transformational leadership as sequential with individual support, culture (including promoting an atmosphere of caring and trust among staff and setting the tone for respectful interaction with students) and structure (including participative decision making, delegation and distributive leadership) preceding vision and goals and performance expectations which, in turn, precede intellectual stimulation (column 1).

In brief, the position taken identifies three major, sequential and embedded elements in successful school reform. It takes the two elements in the definition of social capital, 'groups, networks, norms, and trust' and 'for productive purposes', and extends them to include a third element, learning. The first element in the sequence relates to the social community, how people are communicated with and treated. Success is more likely where people act rather than are always reacting, are empowered, involved in decision-making through a transparent, facilitative and supportive structure, and are trusted, respected, encouraged, and valued (see oval I in the diagram). It is a waste of time moving to the second element until this social community is established. The second element concerns a professional community. A professional community involves shared norms and values including valuing differences and diversity, a focus on implementation and continuous enhancement of quality learning for all students, de-privatisation of practice, collaboration, and critical reflective dialogue, especially that based on performance data (oval II). But a professional community can be static, continuing to do the same or similar thing well. The final element relates to the presence of a capacity for change, learning and innovation, in other words, a professional learning community (oval III). In brief, and in order to better reflect this developmental sequence, I am talking about 'SPLCs', that is, social professional learning communities.



Each element of a SPLC, and each transition between them, can be facilitated by appropriate leadership and ongoing, optimistic, caring, nurturing professional development programs. Also, each element is a prerequisite for the other - as the 'ovals-within-ovals' or 'eggs-within-eggs' diagram implies, they are embedded within each other with only the emphasis changing. For example, when learning is occurring there is still a need to revisit the social community and the professional

community, especially where there has been a change of personnel and/or a new governmental direction announced.

Using this analysis of bonding, bridging and linking social capital to understand the importance of, challenges to and developmental nature of professional learning communities can assist in better translating the research into policy and practice. It can help us:

- understand better and be able to take action on the intricacies involved in moving a school, or part of a school, from where it is now to becoming truly a place of ongoing excellence and equity without those in schools being 'bowled over' by the demands for change that surround them;
- target appropriate interventions to ensure more effective progression through the stages. In targeting interventions recognition will need to be given to the fact that it is a journey and that actions at one stage may be inappropriate, or even counterproductive, at another stage; and,
- support the position that a school will need to be evaluated differently depending on the stage it has reached.

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