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Meeting of the Education Committee at Ministerial Level

FORUM: EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

KEYNOTE SPEECH: EDUCATION, DIVERSITY, SOCIAL COHESION AND "SOCIAL CAPITAL"

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What is good for education? And what is education good for? Those twin questions about the causes and consequences of education are high on the agenda of most advanced countries in the world today.

The standard answers to the first question (at least in the countries that I know best) are more money, higher standards, and accountability. The standard answers to the second question are economic competitiveness, technological progress, and economic growth. In broad terms I do not quarrel with those answers. We should invest thoughtfully in human capital because the economic returns are high and apparently growing.

However, those themes, important though they are, are not the focus of this forum, and they are not the topic of this brief paper. Instead, we are here to discuss the *social* context and consequences of education, broadly defined. The language used for this forum to frame these issues is “social cohesion,” a highly appropriate choice, for it calls our attention, quite properly, to issues of social justice, tolerance, social inclusion, and social integration.

In my own work (and the work of distinguished experts in many other OECD governments and countries), however, a related concept is now being used to frame many of these issues – *social capital*.¹ I hope you will, therefore, forgive me if I first introduce that concept, before turning to the important issues of substance, because I believe that that concept can help us understand more precisely our shared concerns about the social context and consequences of education. I understand, of course, that this is a forum about educational policy, not social theory!

Social capital

Physical capital refers to physical tools that enhance productivity (anything from a screwdriver to a power plant). Several decades ago economists taught us to think of skills and education as another form of capital that also can enhance productivity – *human capital*. More recently, social scientists in many countries have observed that social networks (and the associated norms of reciprocity and trust) can also have powerful effects on productivity, broadly defined, and they have used the term *social capital* to refer to these effects.

The core idea here is very simple: Social networks have value. They have value to the people in the networks – “networking” is demonstrably a good career strategy, for example. But they also have “externalities,” that is, effects on bystanders. Dense social networks in a neighbourhood – barbecues or neighbourhood associations or whatever – can deter crime, for example, even benefiting neighbours who don’t go to the barbecues or belong to the association.

Advocates of the “social capital” lens have reported robust correlations in various countries between vibrant social networks and important social outcomes like lower crime rates, improved child welfare, better public health, more effective government administration, reduced political corruption and tax evasion, improved market performance, and so on. For example, several recent sophisticated econometric studies in Italy have shown that, controlling for all the other factors that might be thought to be relevant, places of higher social capital have more efficient capital and labour markets, exactly as the theory would predict. And as I will emphasize shortly, studies in several OECD countries have strongly suggested that social capital is an important ingredient in educational performance.

¹ Researchers in many different fields and in many different countries have contributed to an exponential growth in research on social capital over the last decade. (See Figure 1, drawn from a forthcoming major new treatise on social capital by David Halpern.)

Not all the externalities of social capital are positive. Some networks have been used to finance and conduct terrorism, for example. Just as physical and human capital – aircraft or knowledge of chemistry, for instance – can be used for bad purposes, so can social capital. Moreover, like physical and human capital, social capital comes in many forms, not all fungible (that is, useful for the same purposes). A dentist’s drill and an oil-rigger’s drill are not interchangeable, though both are physical capital.

Similarly, we need to distinguish among different types of social capital, like the difference between “bonding” social capital – these are links among people who are similar in ethnicity, age, social class, or whatever – and “bridging” social capital, which are links that cut across various lines of social cleavage. (I shall return to that distinction in a moment.) But the main point is that social networks can be a powerful asset, both for individuals and for communities.

In my book *Bowling Alone*, I argued that many forms of social capital – ties to family and friends, civic associations, political parties, labour unions, religious groups, and so on – have been in decline in the US over the last 30-40 years. Many people in other countries feel that a similar decay in community bonds has occurred there, too. However, social capital is not synchronised to a single global metronome, and I do not know whether trends in social capital are unfavourable outside the US or not. But whatever the trends, it is worth paying attention to social networks and norms of reciprocity and trust, because they are so closely related to things we care about, including social cohesion.

To avoid misunderstanding, I should add, finally, that *social capital* is not a substitute for effective public policy, but rather a prerequisite for it and, in part, a consequence of it. Ideologically speaking, *social capital* is an idea that belongs neither to the left nor to the right.

How is *social capital* in the “lean and mean” sense that I use it here – networks and norms of reciprocity and trust – related to *social cohesion*? In my view, social capital is a narrower, more tightly defined concept that calls attention to one crucial ingredient in social cohesion, in the sense of a just, equitable, tolerant, and well-integrated society. Other factors besides social capital are also relevant to social cohesion, of course; for example, an effective welfare state and anti-discrimination policies are also highly relevant. So in my view abundant *social capital* of the right sort can best be seen as an intermediate policy target that, if achieved, could help governments and societies advance toward the broader objective of *social cohesion*.

How social context affects educational outcomes

Against that backdrop, I want now to outline possible answers to our two central questions: How do social capital and social cohesion affect education? And (most important) how does education affect social capital and social cohesion?

The correlation between human capital and social capital is very close, not definitionally or tautologically, but empirically. Individuals and communities with high levels of human capital (education and training) are typically also characterized by high levels of social capital in its various forms. Correlation does not always prove causation, but there is reasonably good evidence in this case that causation flows in both directions, that is, that social capital fosters the acquisition of human capital and that in turn education fosters the accumulation of social capital. For that reason, anyone interested in one side of this equation should also be interested in the other. Here I want to illustrate, first, how social capital can enhance the educational process, and then how education can contribute to social capital and thus to social cohesion. Because of my own expertise, I draw most heavily on US-based evidence, but I have no reason to doubt that in broad terms these generalizations also apply elsewhere in the OECD world.

We are interested in educational outcomes, such as test scores or rates of completion. A wide variety of studies suggest that social capital is an important input into the educational process. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish between social capital “*inside the walls*,” that is, social networks within schools, and social capital “*outside the walls*,” that is, social networks linking schools to the broader community. Inside the walls, it is widely recognized, peer networks *among students* have a powerful effect both on aspiration levels and on the educational process itself. This phenomenon is even more marked, in the US at least, at the university level, where some evidence suggests that college students learn more from one another than they do from formal instruction. (The most important fact about Harvard, for example, from the point of view of becoming educated is the exceptional quality of the other students, not the quality of the faculty, a fact that tends to deflate the self-importance of me and my colleagues.)

Another aspect of “inside the walls” social capital that has recently been shown to have powerful educational effects is the degree of trust and connectedness *among teachers and administrators*. One distinctive feature of high-performing schools, it has been found, is a climate of cooperation within the school community.²

Outside the walls of the school itself, social connections with families and communities are an equally important educational resource. The literature in the US documenting the effects of *parental involvement* on the educational success of children is truly massive. As one review of this literature summarized simply, “When parents are involved at school, their children go further in school, and the schools they go to are better.”³

Beyond parents, the African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child” has become a cliché in contemporary discussions about education in America. One interesting question that arises from this call for *community engagement* is whether some kinds of villages do a better job of raising and educating children than others. Statistical evidence that I (and others) have compiled strongly suggests that the attitudes and behaviour that parents and students bring to the educational process are more deeply and directly affected by the strength of community and family bonds than by the general socioeconomic or racial character of their communities. In fact, the evidence suggests that test scores or dropout rates are better predicted by measures of community-based social capital than by measures of teacher quality or class size or spending per pupil.⁴ To take a very different example of how social context can favourably influence learning, I would cite the widely-praised example of the “Reggio Emilia model” of community-based education; it is no accident that this model emerged from the region in Italy that by many other measures has among the highest levels of social capital, civic engagement, and social cohesion in Italy. Similarly, recent evidence from the UK reportedly suggests that community-based social capital is a significant predictor of student achievement, net of other influences.

One reason that students from minority and impoverished backgrounds are disadvantaged educationally is precisely because they lack access to productive social capital, both inside and outside the school. One strategy, therefore, for assisting under-performing schools has been to foster a more active

² For US evidence on this point, see Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara L. Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, 2002).

³ Henderson, A. T. and Berla, N. (Eds.), *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement* (Washington, DC: National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1994), p. 1.

⁴ Robert D. Putnam, “Community-Based Social Capital and Educational Performance,” in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, Diane Ravitch and Joseph Viteritti, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). The generalization in the text is robustly true, controlling for many other potentially confounding variables, such as poverty, race, class size, educational spending, family structure, and so on.

community and to link parents and community members more immediately to schools.⁵ A complementary strategy that has been shown to be effective is the use of mentors (that is, part-time lay teachers from the community) who can bring skills, experience, energy, and caring from the community into the schools. For example, one successful program in the US called *Experience Corps* draws on specially trained retired adults (often themselves members of minority groups) to mentor disadvantaged young children in school on a regular basis.⁶

No doubt the details of exactly when and how social capital influences educational outcomes vary importantly from country to country, and what works in one cultural setting may not work elsewhere. But the evidence strongly suggests that policymakers concerned to raise educational standards need to be concerned about the social context of education (both inside and outside the school walls) as they are about computers, textbooks, and teacher certification.

How education affects social capital and social cohesion

Social cohesion is an increasingly prominent concern in most of our countries. In part, this is because social and ethnic diversity is rapidly increasing everywhere, and social and economic inequalities are also increasing in many (though not all) OECD countries. In fact, the most certain prediction that can be made about any advanced nation today is that it will be more ethnically diverse 20 years from now, both because of immigration and because of differential fertility. Diversity and immigration can be important social and economic assets, but the process of becoming more diverse involves challenges that are familiar in all our countries. In part, this is because migration itself tends to be a socially isolating experience, as family and community ties are left behind in the place of origin, and new ties take time (for all of us) to construct in a new place. Responding to that fact, immigrant groups have always made special efforts to minimize the inevitable loss of social capital through such devices as ethnic enclaves and “chain migration,” but the transition remains difficult.

In this context, the distinction between “bonding” social capital (that is, ties within a given social or ethnic group) and “bridging” social capital (that is, ties between groups) is very important. Just as our bodies need both vitamin A and vitamin C, so too social health requires adequate stores of both bonding and bridging social capital. If you get sick, the people who bring chicken soup are likely to represent your bonding social capital, but a society that has only bonding and no bridging is in serious danger of coming apart. So a modern pluralistic democracy has special needs for bridging social capital. But it is a fact about the human condition that bridging social capital is harder to build than bonding social capital—“birds of a feather flock together.” So leaders in every modern society today need to be especially concerned about fostering networks and trust that bridge divisions.

Social inclusion must be a high priority for moral, social, and political reasons. But the knowledge economy itself has a distinctive dependence on social capital. It is no accident that Silicon Valley (like its counterparts elsewhere) is a place of intense “networking.” The image of the isolated, hermit-like inventor who transforms an industry may never have been historically accurate, but it is wildly wrong today. So even from a strictly economic point of view, the coming generation in all our countries must be equipped not merely with intellectual skills and knowledge, but also with skills in teamwork and “bridging social capital.”

⁵ Dennis Shirley, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997); Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Archon Fung, *Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁶ See Robert D. Putnam and Lewis Feldstein (with Don Cohen), *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), chap. 9.

For any government concerned to increase social capital and social cohesion, the educational process is the single most important and effective policy lever. In that sense, ministries of education must play a central role in perfecting strategies for building social capital. This broad claim rests on many specific facts.

Most fundamentally, in most (perhaps all) countries the best predictor of high social capital is simply years of formal education. Even holding constant other factors, including race, income, gender, ethnicity, occupation, and many others, more educated people have wider, deeper, stronger social networks and participate more in social, community, and political life. (Given the location of our meeting, it is appropriate that one of the most recent studies demonstrating this fact is Irish.⁷)

Quite apart from the simple quantity of education, however, other features of the educational process have been shown to be important in fostering social capital, civic participation, and social cohesion. In the interests of time and space, I shall enumerate some of these briefly:

- *Appropriate pedagogy and curricula* have been shown to have durable and consistent effects on students' social and community engagement in later life. In the US and the UK, for example, evidence suggests that "civic education" or "citizenship education" can inculcate not only factual information about public life (which is in turn a precondition for participation), but also norms and skills, such as tolerance, public speaking, and habits of collaboration. Pedagogy that encourages active teamwork seems likely to be more effective in inculcating social skills than pedagogy that promotes purely individual achievement, though of course a balance must be struck here.
- Recently, schools and universities in many parts of America have experimented with "*service learning*" or "*community service*," that is, programs that combine activity in the community with academic reflection. (For example, students in a course on environmental biology might become involved in some local environmental clean-up project.) Initial evidence from such programs is strongly encouraging, in that students who have participated in such courses are more likely to be civically involved in later years than are comparable students without such an experience.⁸
- Outside the classroom itself, schools can foster social capital, civic engagement, and social cohesion in other ways. For example, at least in the US consistent evidence suggests that participation in *extracurricular activities* during secondary school (athletics, music, student government, and so on) strongly predicts adult civic involvement, even as long as thirty years later. Moreover, sports and arts represent especially congenial contexts within which to build "bridging social capital," because they are less immediately dependent upon verbal skills.
- Similarly, schools can serve as especially useful sites or *focal points for building social capital* in the wider community. Indeed, the concept of "social capital" itself was first invented in 1915 by L. J. Hanifan, a rural educator in the impoverished state of West Virginia, as part of a passionate

⁷ As yet unpublished research by Thomas Healy of the Irish Department of Education.

⁸ On this specific point, as well as my other generalizations about the impact of schools on civic engagement and social capital, two very valuable sources of rigorous, unbiased, practical information about US-based evidence are (1) CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, based at the University of Maryland, with its exceptionally useful website: <http://www.civicyouth.org/> and (2) Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, *The Civic Mission of Schools* (New York: 2003), a comprehensive report on civic education with 57 authors/endorsers.

argument for what would now be called “community schools,” that is, schools that even after hours serve as a place of community members to come together for shared purposes.

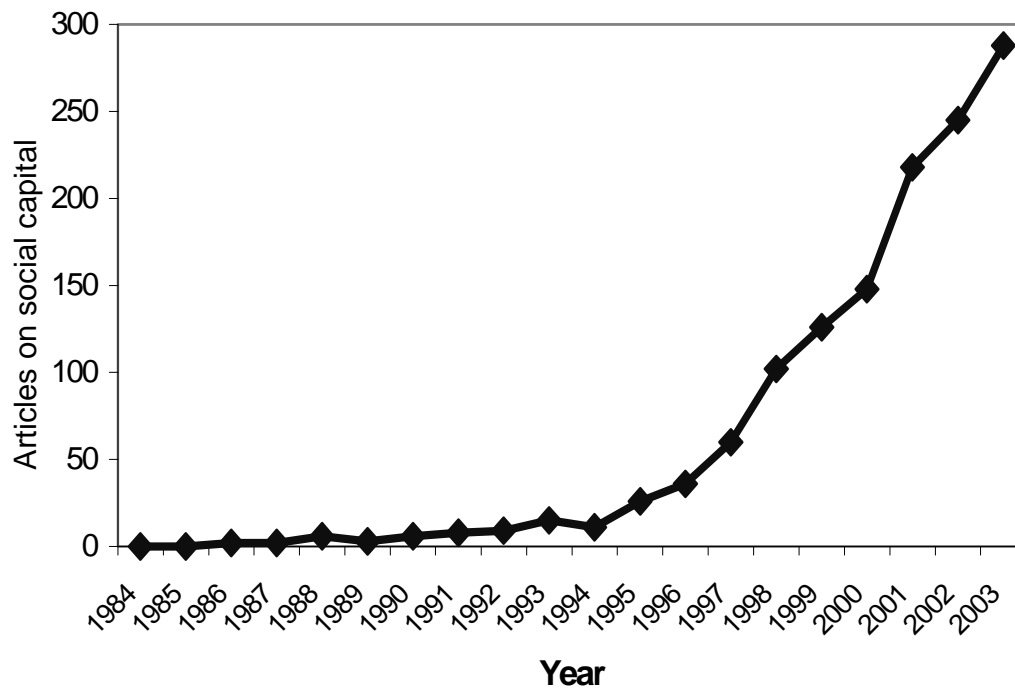
- *Resolving the dilemma of size.*⁹ As a general rule, smaller is better for fostering solidarity and forging connections. Smaller towns, smaller classrooms, smaller schools, smaller firms, smaller countries, and so on generally display higher levels of trust and engagement. Listening, communicating, taking responsibility, and building trust is easier in more intimate settings, whereas larger settings foster anonymity and alienation. On the other hand, bigger is often better for technical efficiency and sometimes better for diversity. Educators have for some time recognized this dilemma of size as regards learning per se, but it is especially sharp in the domain of social capital. One strategy for resolving this dilemma might be called the *cellular* approach – to nest smaller groups within a larger, more encompassing organization. This basic organizational strategy (familiar to guerilla *comandantes* and Rotarians alike) leads, in the case of education, to an approach called (in the US) “schools within schools.” But whether or not that specific approach is the best in any specific setting, educational policymakers must recognize that consolidation of schools into ever larger units can have severely adverse effects on the ability of those schools to foster social capital and social cohesion.
- *Social integration of schools.* In many countries, but certainly in the US, some of the most bitter controversies about educational policy have involved issues of the ethnic and social mix of students within a given school. It is no accident that the pre-eminent issue of the civil rights revolution in America concerned the racial integration of schools. Reports now suggest a dismaying resurgence of de facto (not de jure) racial segregation. Less widely discussed, but equally problematic is growing de facto segregation of educational institutions along lines of social class. Obviously, the reason that segregation (either by race or by class) is so distressing from the point of view of social cohesion is that it radically impairs the ability of schools to foster bridging social capital. Habits of crossing (or not crossing) lines of class and race are formed early in life.
- *Language and cultural assimilation.* Since full integration into a community requires command of the language of that community, the language of instruction in school is a matter of heated controversy in parts of the US (and perhaps other countries). I personally am more relaxed about this issue than many of my colleagues, for I believe that whatever the policy of schools, larger economic and cultural imperatives provide powerful incentives for immigrants to learn the national language. Indeed, in my country at least such conflicts are hardly new: In the 1890s a topic of major public controversy in some American states concerned the use of Swedish and German in the public schools!
- Language, however, is merely one facet of an important and complex issue about bridging and bonding social capital. It is easy to assume that bridging and bonding are incompatible, but some evidence suggests that is not necessarily true. Dutch researchers, for example, have found that the Turkish immigrants who are most actively involved in broader Dutch society are precisely those who are also most actively involved in the life of the Turkish community itself. Bonding, in short, can be a prelude to bridging, rather than precluding bridging. This question has immediate relevance for policy issues that have recently been at the forefront of national debate in some OECD countries, such as the issue of head scarves for Muslim students. Clearly, there are important national differences in both educational philosophy and conceptions of citizenship. Generally speaking, North Americans are more relaxed and even enthusiastic about multicultural approaches that embrace and celebrate diversity, while some continental countries are much more

⁹ On this issue, see Putnam and Feldstein, *Better Together* (2003), pp. 275-279 *et passim*.

skeptical, believing that “republican citizens” must, in effect, renounce or play down ethnic identification, at least within the school gates. I have no intention of taking a stand myself on this issue in this setting!

Conclusion

The most fundamental conclusion I would draw is twofold: first, education indeed affects social capital and social cohesion and vice versa; second, educational policy-makers from across the OECD have much to learn from one another about what works when and where as regards the vital link between education and social cohesion

Figure 1. Growth in scholarly articles on "social capital"

Source: David Halpern, *Social Capital* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004, forthcoming).