(Conference Title)

Power Brokers: Building Youth Social Capital through Connected Learning

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Contributions of social capital theory and social network models in advancing the connection
between students' school-based learning and community-based opportunities
for pursuing interest-driven learning

Ricardo D. Stanton-Salazar, Ph.D.
Los Angeles, CA

www.stanton-salazar.com

rstantonsalazar@icloud.com

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Social capital theory, situated in the discipline of sociology, has the potential to advance our efforts to socially embed working-class urban youth in social networks that not only empower them, but that also foster the social and cognitive skills that will last a life-time. By social networks I refer here to that web of relationships within which every person lives; these relationships usually span across different social and institutional settings. For one individual, his or her social network is one important way they experience privilege: access to people in power, access to many forms of resources and support, and the means which they exert a greater deal of control over their lives. For another individual, their social network becomes a social prison that denies him or her access to the most basic forms of support.

Effective use of social capital theory in the field of youth empowerment requires tolerating a bit of sociological jargon and a set of concepts which carry some specificity; on the other hand, these concepts permit us to see youth empowerment in new and exciting ways. Although defined in various and conceptually-distinct ways in sociology, "social capital" is used here to refer to resources and forms of support that we can access through our genuine relationships with people who care about us. To illustrate, say you are in need of a quick short-term loan of $500 (that is, "economic capital"). Your friend *Maria* has been there for you over many years; in turn, you've been there for her. You have confidence she'll lend you the money; therefore, the $500 dollars she has in her checking account is in some sense, *your*s—that is, it is part of your "social capital," (i.e., financial support that is part of your relationship). For the next 10 years, you'll always have access to the money in Maria's checking account. Maria is the director of a community health center, and is a close friend and colleague of a school board member in your district. In this sense, Maria functions as an "institutional agent" situated in your network; that is, she occupies a position that carries status and which affords her opportunities to regularly engage people of power and influence. The day comes when you and other parents protest the coerced relocation of a highly-respected teacher at your child's school. You turn to Maria and ask her to set up a closed-door meeting with this board member; the meeting happens the next day. The teacher remains at your school. When we look at the networks of adolescents and high school students, we see that teachers and counselors are potential institutional agents. I say "potential" because a relationship with an institutional agent constitutes a relationship of genuine affect and mutual trust. It's not just, "Yeah, he works at my school." Furthermore, institutional agents, by definition, are sources of the kind of support that can only be obtained from college-educated adults who are engaged in one or more professional roles.

Mentor-youth Relationships

Traditionally, our efforts at finding reliable and committed "mentors" for inner-city youth have been challenging; only a small percentage of such adults stick around for the long-haul. No doubt, when a mentor does stick around, the positive effects on a youth's life are considerable. One problem, however, is that the focus on the [dyadic] mentor-youth relationships may keep us from looking at young people through a network-analytic perspective—that is, as individuals who are inextricably embedded in a social network—either a network that empowers, or one that denies the young individual the support they require to achieve a prosperous future. Using a framework built upon the concepts of *social capital* and *institutional agents* also allows us a

better understanding of how social class, race, and gender operate in society, defining the way of life of every person, young person and adult.

When I began to merge the research literature on youth development and the research guided by social capital theory, I began by first visualizing, then conceptualizing, the networks of middle-class [older] adolescents—networks which, of course, can not be disentangled from their parents' networks or larger kinship network. Theoretically, the social networks of middle-class and upper-middle youth need no "intervention" as we conventionally use the term; embeddedness in a middle-class network is synonymous with possession of *social capital*—that is, embeddedness in a web of relationships with college-educated adults, across institutional settings, who are potentially willing to act as "institutional agents." Many times, such people (youth and adults) don't absolutely require having a conceptual understanding of "social capital," nor a conscious, cognitive map of their social network. When "intervention" does occur for middle- and upper-middle-class youth, the objective is to increase their competitiveness as they pursue opportunities that carry prestige and special privileges (e.g., admission into MIT, Stanford; an internship within the federal government).

Looking through the prism of middle-class adolescent networks, the development of interventions for low-income youth of color, becomes quite complex (which can be a good thing). Even were our efforts to be guided by a social network (social capital) framework, the work entailed would be great—though not impossible. I say great, because rather than our typical and dedicated efforts to impact as many kids as possible (*via* one intervention program at one site, one adult serving many youth), we'd have to pay attention to the development and composition of each young person's social network (their larger social network, and their more specific *support network*). We'd also have to attend to the development of each individual's relationship skills and help-seeking strategies.

When we talk about an adolescent's *existing network* (i.e., their network at any point in time), that's where *social class* and *race* once again play a primary role. When we look at the existing or natural networks of adolescents from working-class or low-income families, genuine relationships with [college-educated] institutional agents are few. Those who are fortunate may have some type of supportive relationship with a teacher at school (e.g., an AVID teacher) (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

An Optimal Support Network: One with Multiple Agents and Brokers

Any programmatic intervention, guided by social capital theory, would work to increase students' social ties to multiple institutional agents. Two types of actions or conditions would be required:
- first, adolescents would be situated in one or more organizational environments where they regularly interact with adults willing to serve as *institutional agents*, "mentors," and/or (i.e., Hive).
- Second, adolescents would learn how to effectively engage in "youth initiated" help-seeking behaviors, and as well other "youth-initiated" behaviors that would serve to enhance their relationships with various agents.

The overall goal would be for adolescents to learn to develop relationships with multiple agents characterized by various degrees of rapport and intimacy (i.e., *strong ties* vs. *weak ties*). Studies show that "weak ties" are very important in a person's social network (i.e., people we don't know well, but who we interact with on a regular basis). Intervention efforts that foster a one-on-one mentorship relationship between adolescent and a willing adult are valuable, even necessary for many. However, if we follow a *classical social capital paradigm,* our goal would parallel those of professionals seeking to expand their networks. One agent cannot provide all the resources and support needed by an individual; so for example, one agent in the network would be able to provide instruction in digital media, another providing information regarding social services. Another agent would be able to advocate for the adolescent in the school context; and yet, another agent would be serve as a "bridging agent " or *broker,* introducing the adolescent to new agents, and then overseeing these new relationships (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Furthermore, if one agent doesn't come through for the adolescent, other agents can be approached--having multiple agents is like an insurance policy; the adolescent doesn't become "dependent" on one adult. Putting all one's eggs in one basket is the opposite of "networking."

Conventional practice sees a mentor as providing *all* the resources that an adolescent needs; but that places a significant burden on the adult (perhaps one reason many mentors disengage in about a year's time). Also, conventional views of a mentor leaves the adult alone—rather than part of a network that supports the mentor. In contrast, "mentoring" can be seen as an adult who plays the role of a "bridge" or "broker," that is, an adult who connects the adolescent to various agents across institutional sites, all the while, directly providing resources and support when possible. What we would want is for adolescents to come to understand that *success,* and achieving one's goals, at whatever age, requires a network consisting of multiple agents, each one providing a specific type of resource or support. Ultimately, that is the definition of "networking." Individual networks are forever expanding and contracting; in some ways, they are "alive and breathing."

Teaching Networking Skills & Help-seeking Strategies (i.e., Learning to build relationships with people ready to empower us using their resources, power, and influence)

Simultaneously, I turned my attention to the challenge of teaching "networking" and "help-seeking" skills to adolescents; admittedly, that's a challenge, because we are addressing adolescents who have social skills and cultural competencies in their own class-ethnic homes and communities, but usually not those skills required to confidently engage middle-class institutional agents on a long-term basis.

Regarding the Mozilla Hive NYC Learning Network model, an experimental "networking approach" might entail four simultaneous goals that revolve around reciprocal social support and mutual encouragement: (1) Hive-affiliated adults to incorporate themselves into a young person's personal network (as a conscious, theoretically-grounded, objective); (2) Hive-affiliated adults to incorporate themselves into each other's network (agent-agent relationships, as exemplified in the dissertations of nine students I advised); (3) Hive-affiliated youth to do their part in building relationships with Hive-affiliated adults and other individuals, as well as to actively incorporate them into their personal networks, and how to engage in effective "help

seeking" (conscious objectives and continual reflection); and finally, (4) Hive-affiliated youth to incorporate each other into their personal networks (i.e., peer network).

In the end, a social capital approach to youth-empowerment not only "connects" youth to an adult willing to provide some kind of support or interested in sharing some of their expertise, it entails revealing to youth the way the world operate for people across the global, whether they be people from a small town in Mexico, or be they executives on Wall Street. The knowledge one gains for developing different kinds of relationships with different kinds of people is not something that is easily lost. For inner-city youth, a mentor may disengage, a caring teacher may leave town, and intervention personnel may transition to a new group of youth; these losses are real and emotionally taxing, yet adolescents' cumulative successes with building supportive ties to adults not only brings resilience, it also functions to regenerate their social network.

References

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