*Bridging the Social Gap:*

Recommendations for Building Bridging Social Capital in Schools

EDST 400 Capstone Project

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*“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality; tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”*

- Martin Luther King

***ABSTRACT***

This paper explores how bridging social capital functions in a school settings and identifies its benefits for student learning. It demonstrates that segregated learning environments that are caused by neighborhood segregation and racialized tracking negatively affects students ability to accrue bridging social capital, which harms their learning. Recommendations for building bridging social capital within and across schools are introduced in the conclusion.

***KEY TERMS:***

Social capital, Integration, Racialized Tracking, Bridging social capital, Bonding social capital

***PROLOGUE***

*“It’s not what you know, it's who you know.”*

I realized at an early age that connections matter in education. I first became interested in the concept of *social capital* in high school, after reflecting on my experiences growing up in a segregated school district in Houston, TX. My experiences helped me realize both the significance of social capital in education and the lack thereof in my and my classmates’ schooling. Although I did not fully understand the concept of social capital at the time, I intuitively understood that the relationships I developed inside school, with classmates, teachers, and administrators, as well as those I developed outside of school, with mentors, supervisors, and neighbors, played a key role in my educational experience. My mentor, for example, shared summer internship opportunities with me over email, a few of my favorite teachers stayed after school for hours every week to discuss my passion for politics, and my next door neighbor never failed to give me a pat on the back and mention how proud she was of me for doing well in school when I passed by her porch. These relationships provided me with the *support, information, and resources*, what I came to see as social capital, that helped me graduate as valedictorian of my school and become the first graduate to ever attend Yale University. In short, I believe I succeeded in public school because I figured out a way to cultivate *social capital* for myself in my schools and community. My story, however, is more an anomaly than a common experience for students in my community. I saw that my classmates suffered academically and socially as the result of not having access to the social capital I developed, which I hypothesized as being a consequence of racialized tracking in our segregated school district. I wondered, is it more difficult for students to cultivate social capital in a segregated learning environment like the one I grew up in?

Map of the Boundaries of the Spring Branch Independent School District.[[1]](#footnote-1)


I grew up in the Spring Branch Independent School District, which serves 35,000 students in Northwest Houston, TX. I attended a total of three elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school in my public school career, which helped me see significant differences in the student experience and culture across each school. From a zoomed-out perspective, our district was diverse. However, our schools individually reflected the racial and class divisions that cut through our community.[[2]](#footnote-2) Most teachers and students silently understood that the poor brown and black kids lived on the north side of the I-10 freeway, while the wealthier, white kids lived in the south side. I first realized the segregated reality of my community in 3rd grade when I tested into SPIRAL, a special academic program for gifted and talented (GT) students. After joining the program, I was bussed from my school, Westwood Elementary, across the highway to Bendwood Elementary once a week, where I was taught an advanced curriculum that was more rigorous than the curriculum in my assigned school.



<http://public-schools.startclass.com/l/91108/Westwood-Elementary-in-Houston-Texas>[[3]](#footnote-3)

At Bendwood, I spent less time completing worksheets and more time designing and executing projects; for instance, we studied ancient aquifer systems by building our own models and learned about flight by operating a simulator. However, for the first time, I was no longer surrounded by my low-income, Latino classmates. Instead, I sat in class with the wealthier, white students who lived on south side of the highway.[[4]](#footnote-4) Initially, I did not think much of being one of the only Latino kids in the program, but over time, I started to notice a problem. The racial division that permeated my elementary school experience pulsed throughout our district; not only were our schools racially segregated, but our classrooms were too.

Through this experience, I observed that *neighborhood segregation* produced two distinct social realities for white students and students of color in schools, each endowed with a different set of expectations and animated by different academic priorities. The white kids were smart, motivated, and destined for college. The brown and black kids were not. This distinction was strengthened by *racialized tracking,* a strategy used by schools to group students on the basis of their assessed academic ability, that ended up further dividing students of color from white students in the classroom.[[5]](#footnote-5) I experienced these two realities throughout my education, but I became acutely aware of them in high school when I became an Advanced Placement (AP) student. The AP students in my school were mostly white, while the majority of the non-AP students were Latinx or black and low-income. The AP students were expected to handle rigorous academic material, matriculate into a four-year university, and received the support to do so. The non-AP students, on the other hand, were isolated from the small group of AP students, were not expected to go to college, and were generally perceived by the rest of the school population as unintelligent. From the brief interactions that I had with non-AP students, I gathered that they felt less motivated about school and were reluctant to reach out to fellow AP students or even teachers for academic or social support. Consequently, many of them struggled to feel motivated about completing school work and ruled out applying to four-year institutions, opting to apply to community college, enlist in the army, or work after graduation instead. Its as if we inhabited two completely different worlds in the same school building. This reality shocked me. I wondered why I was not friends with more non-AP students. *Why did my friends and even some of my teachers make fun of their academic performance instead of offering help?* Asking these questions made me feel morally wrong for receiving what seemed to be a better education, more support, and higher expectations from my teachers. I decided to find a solution.

I found that non-AP students faced a restriction of their access to social capital that was structurally reinforced by racialized tracking and segregation. They were forced into isolation by the social structure of our school, which caused damage to their educational experience. In my eyes, increasing their access to social capital would help alleviate their academic and social problems by connecting them to a network of people who could help provide support and motivation. I started to look for ways to break the social barriers imposed by racialized tracking and segregation and seek out opportunities for connection. In 2015, I created a college preparation program with a group of friends called, A Better Hand (ABH), that taught students how to build relationships and leverage them for their goals through a mechanism called the ‘community-mindset’. I wrote:

“Using the community mindset taught us to be mindful of our personal goals in seeking community, while being empathetic towards the needs and goals of others in serving the community. This mindset is the mechanism through which we learned how to acquire social capital, empowering us to create our own customized networks, or communities, of individuals who can help make our goals a reality.”

Although all the students in the program matriculated into a four-year university, the organization had several flaws. Nonetheless, through my experiences, I learned that relationships matter in education. I realized that who we know, the people who we are connected to and interact with on a daily basis, affects both *what* we learn in school and *how* we learn it. In my four years at Yale, now a product of many courses, I learned that my pre-college experiences are not unique but an example of a much larger set of variables encompassing racism, social and economic class differences, teachers expectations, the cumulative result which increase or decrease the kind and amount of social capital one accumulates which powerfully influences one’s education. My capstone project explores the relationship of social capital or lack thereof on student learning. Bridging the social barriers erected by our own schools and building social capital for students will not alleviate the racial achievement gap or inequity on its own, but it is a key step in creating a truly integrated society.

***INTRODUCTION***

The late educator Rita Pierson was right when she observed that the education community often overlooks “the value and importance of human connections; *relationships*” in our schools.[[6]](#footnote-6) As Pierson illustrates in her inspiring TED talk, American public schools are more than just dispensaries of written knowledge that take in inputs and churn out educated outputs; they are dynamic social institutions that help introduce students into the social life of their community. It is in school that students should learn not only how to read, write, and compute, but also to discuss, debate, and converse with their peers and their teachers. Students ought to learn how to study in groups, how to collaborate on projects, and how to ask questions of one another to enhance the learning of everyone in the classroom because life outside of school demands that people work together to solve problems. Learning, from this perspective, is a social endeavor that depends as much on the *relationships between people* as it does on the content of a curriculum.

If this is the case, then the type of relationships that students cultivate and the characteristics of the network in which they are embedded has implications for how they perform in school. This idea is encapsulated in the concept of *social capital*, or the social resources that affect student learning -- *information, relationships, norms* -- which emerge from the social network that constitutes their school district (students, teachers, administrators, parents). To possess social capital means to be an active participant in a social network that is rich in trust; where people are likely help you by offering resources or information -- even if they do not know you -- because they recognize the importance of community. To lack social capital means isolation, a lack of trust in others, and retraction from participation in social life. The basic premise of this idea is that *who* students are connected to affects *what* they learn and *how* they learn it. Their access to social capital and its stock in their social network affects their educational experience.

There are two types of social capital — bonding and bridging — each of which affects a child's learning differently.[[7]](#footnote-7) *Bonding social capita*l emerges within tightly knit social networks composed of people who are similar to one another. *Bridging social capital* comes from the connections between individuals who are from different social groups together (i.e. race, class, geography). Students embedded in different social networks due to geographical, racial, or class differences have access to different types of information, relationships, and norms and thus can offer these resources to one another through their connection. I claim that social capital, particularly *bridging social capital,* is an essential component of a child's education because it provides them with resources (*i.e. relationships, information, norms*) that they otherwise would not have access to by themselves or in their immediate social network. A student benefits when they learn next to someone who is different from them because they can offer one another knowledge of their unique life experiences, access to relationships that can help them reach their academic/professional goals, and norms that can benefit their learning experience.

The problem is that a segregated learning environment -- caused either by school segregation or racialized tracking -- structurally limits a child's ability to acquire bridging social capital by cutting off opportunities for them to connect with students who inhabit different social networks. American public schools are more racially and economically divided today than they were fifteen years ago.[[8]](#footnote-8) Unfortunately, now more than ever, students are less likely to learn next to someone who is different than them, which means they are less likely to learn *from* them too. Students are divided through *racialized* *tracking,* which groups students based on their assessed intellectual ability and produces AP classes populated mostly by white students and non-AP classes filled with students of color. And, if public schools continue to reproduce the social divisions that stratify society without intervention, students will be robbed of the opportunity to learn how to communicate across differences and see the world from a new perspective — both essential tools for being an engaged citizen in a growing multicultural democracy. Thus, I argue that schools ought to help combat the historical, political, and economic forces that drive modern day segregation by transforming themselves into *democratic spaces of integration* that actively build *bridging social capital*.

Research has shown that neighborhood segregation that is reproduced through schools negatively affects students.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, there is limited research on how the problem of segregated education affects students’ ability to acquire social capital, particularly bridging social capital. This project addresses this gap in the literature by addressing the following research questions:

1. What is bridging social capital and how does it function in a school setting?
2. What is the relationship between bridging social capital and a segregated learning environment?
3. How can school districts cultivate bridging social capital and transform it into bonding capital to improve student learning?

To answer these questions, this paper engages in an integrative literature review of social capital theory in the context of the literature on school segregation and racialized tracking. It seeks to merge these two bodies of scholarship to provide a new lens for analyzing the problem of segregation in education. First, I compiled a list of the major works in social capital theory and synthesized a new definition of *bridging social capital* that specifically fits the context of education. Next, I demonstrate why bridging social capital is an essential component of a student’s education. Then, I operationalize the concept of *bridging social capital* in a segregated and desegregated learning environment, demonstrating how segregated environments limit students’ ability to cultivate bridging social capital. Finally, I offer strategies for school districts to integrate their student population.

My contribution to the literature lies in synthesizing a conception of social capital that fits the problem of segregated schooling, and in identifying the analytical difference between how bonding social capital and bridging social capital function in a school setting. Additionally, I am providing a theoretical explanation for how bridging social capital benefits all students, regardless of their race or income, which has not been specified in the literature. I then link this explanation to the study of desegregation and offer it as a starting point for developing an integration strategy in segregated school districts. I end by offering a brief list of policy recommendations, potential program ideas, and suggestions for practice, that all work towards the goal of building bridging social capital for students and integrating schools.

***CONSTRUCTING A SOCIAL CAPITAL FRAMEWORK IN EDUCATION***

The concept of social capital has been used in a variety of academic contexts, including the fields of economics, political science, philosophy, and sociology. The versatility of social capital as a conceptual tool of analysis has allowed scholars to explore how the relationships between people and the social networks they form affect different aspects of human life; such as people's’ level of civic engagement, proclivity to commit crime, propensity to participate in PTAs, the transaction costs in their community, and more.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, because the concept has been employed in a variety of contexts, some scholars have critiqued its theoretical value, such as Foley and Edwards (1999) who claim that social capital suffers from “acute definitional fuzziness” or De Souza Briggs (1997) who asserts that social capital has taken on a “circus-tent quality.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The remedy to this problem lies in the development of a precise definition of social capital that fits the context of education and more specifically, the problem of a segregated learning environment. Thus, in this paper, *social capital* is defined as social resources that affect student learning -- *relationships, information, norms* -- which emerge from the social network that constitutes a school district. The focus of this paper will be on a specific type of social capital called *bridging social capital*, which refers to those resources gained from the connections between individuals from different social groups (i.e. different races, economic class, or geography). The latter definition assumes that people who are members of different social groups as a result of their race, class, or geographic locations are likely embedded in different social networks, and therefore, offer resources that are unique to their network to people who are not directly embedded within it. These definitions are derived from past scholarship on the concept of social capital, which I outline in the following section.

**The Origin of Social Capital: The Value of Associational Life**

The conceptual origin of social capital can be traced to Alexis de Tocqueville’s political analysis of *civic associations,* or the independent and voluntary associations of civic life that animated American society in the 19th century.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although Tocqueville did not explicitly use the term “social capital” in his writing, he effectively described what it looks like and how it functions in observing the value that emerged from participation in the associations he studied, including clubs, churches, nonprofits and community groups. In short, Tocqueville argues that civic associations are crucial for the health of American democracy because they provide space for “Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds” to unite, work, and learn with another and thus, form a political counterweight against the institutional power of the state.[[13]](#footnote-13) These associations function as a check against an overreaching government because they empower citizens to form meaningful relationships with one other that “take on new definitions and purposes” which extend beyond their immediate, private interests.[[14]](#footnote-14) By participating in a wide variety of associations, citizens’ “sense of membership in and responsibility for a larger social world” is heightened, which increases their capacity to cooperate. It is in this way that civic associations become “a critical source of social capital;” they provide space for diverse groups of citizens to connect for a variety of purposes and learn habits that produce social capital, such as respect for others, self-restraint, public spiritedness, and the willingness and ability to participate in the give and take of self-government.[[15]](#footnote-15) While Tocqueville never made mention of the term social capital, he demonstrated that its essence in analyzing the value of associational life and the habits it produces. His analysis provided fertile grounds for scholars to carve out the concept’s theoretical dimensions in the future.

It was not until the second half of the 19th century that the term social capital first appeared in the field of economics, although its use diverged from a Tocquevillian understanding. James Farr identified its initial appearances in the works of political economists Karl Marx (1867), Henry Sidgwick (1883), John Bates Clark (1885), Edward Bellamy (1897) and Alfred Marshall (1890). These economists conceived of social capital as the “aggregate of tools, inventions, improvements in land” that were jointly held, rather than the personal holdings or trade investments belonging to individuals (Farr 2004, 22).[[16]](#footnote-16) From this perspective, any physical or economic capital put to social use was social capital, which means that physical capital such as roads and bridges counted as such because they benefited all people instead of a few individuals. Although this conception is not directly related to how social capital is thought of today, it marks an important turn in analysis from the resources possessed by the individual to the resources of the community, reflecting a similar sentiment put forth by Tocqueville. This attention to the resources directly connected to a community, as opposed to an individual, is an important attribute of how social capital is defined in this paper.

Then in 1900, John Dewey briefly mentioned social capital in his report, *The Elementary School Record,* applying it in the context of education instead of economics. While Dewey also does not explicitly define social capital, he draws a relationship between access to it and learning. In this report, Dewey provides a set of principles for elementary education he developed through his work in the field of theoretical pedagogy and his experiences directing the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago. He asserts that students should learn how to live in society by directly engaging in its activities through experiential learning as opposed to through reading about it in textbooks. The process through which they learn how to engage in society, then, is inherently a social one, in which adults transmit information -- the customs and traditions that constitute their way of life -- through their *relationships* to young ones.[[17]](#footnote-17) Dewey believed that engagement in these relationships would offer students social capital, but required that they develop a command of reading, writing, and arithmeticthrough their schooling. Dewey explains:

“These subjects are social in a double sense. They represent the tools which society has evolved in the past as the instruments of its intellectual pursuits. They [also] represent the keys which will unlock to the child the wealth of *social capital* which lies beyond the possible range of his limited experience” (9: 230).[[18]](#footnote-18)

To Dewey, social capital extends the possible range of limited experience and helps students develop “a varied background of contact and acquaintance with realities, social and physical.”[[19]](#footnote-19) From this, it could be inferred that Dewey conceptualized social capital to exist in the relationships, or associations, students could form with others whose experiences and ideas would extend their realities, social and physical. Like Tocqueville, Dewey believed that “society means associations” and he saw the value, or social capital, that those associations could offer students. Students can gain access to it only by developing the tools that make meaningful and convey the “symbols of language” that structure and organize society; anyone who fails to do so would be limited in “his ability to connect and collaborate with others.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Still, while Dewey is correct in noting that mastery of reading, writing, and arithmetic arms students with tools to accrue social capital, he failed to consider how the wealth social capital itself can influence what and how students learn. The latter relationship is how social capital is operationalized in this paper; access to more social capital benefits student learning.

The concept of social capital was later expanded upon by L. J. Hanifan, state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia, who wrote about its importance in the context of increasing community involvement in schools in 1916.[[21]](#footnote-21) Interestingly, Farr (2004) argues that Hanifan would have been familiar with Dewey’s work and may have employed the term social capital after reading his report.[[22]](#footnote-22) Hanifan described social capital as,

“those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social discourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit… The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself… If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

In short, Hanifan identifies the tangible substances, or resources, generated by social capital, explains that it accumulates through repeated interactions in associations, and claims that it benefits both the individual and the group. He also makes the judgement that social capital is generally good, which can be true depending on how it is utilized. This paper makes a similar assessment, as the goal of producing social capital for students would be to improve their learning experience. Rather than leaving the student to himself, the student should be connected with others in order to ‘accumulate’ their social capital.

Though Hanifan provided a substantial basis for explaining what social capital looks like and how it operates in the daily life of people, it did not attract the attention of other scholars and social commentators for nearly half a century. Jane Jacobs (1961) referenced social capital in her work on urban environments and Glenn Loury (1977) wrote about social capital in the context of racial inequalities, but neither scholar fully explained the concept. It was not until the late 1980s that the modern debate on social capital began to take shape.

**II. The Modern Debate in Social Capital: Resources from Networks**

The scholarship on social capital started to mature in the discussions produced by the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1980; 1983; 1986) and James Coleman (1987; 1987; Coleman and Hoffer 1987; 1988). It was later extended by Robert Putnam (1993; 1999; 2000) and then Gregory Plagens (2011). Their works provided a much sharper and extensive definition of the concept that included key dimensions that could be observed and studied. This section outlines how social capital was operationalized in diverging theoretical terrains and reveals its unifying theme: social capital exists as the resources that emerge from social ties that can be used to facilitate certain action.

First, Bourdieu (1980) demonstrated that social capital can be conceptualized as the resources made available to the individual through their connection to a social network. Because he was concerned with the social reproduction of class status, Bourdieu argued that social capital was used by the wealthy to preserve their status in society. He defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships or mutual acquaintance and recognition” (248).[[24]](#footnote-24) In other words, social capital refers to the resources (i.e. professional opportunities, academic benefits, social life, etc.) that you gain because of ‘who you know;’ the people who you are connected to. From this perspective, measurement of the stock of social capital requires an assessment of the size of one’s network and the capital available from others in the group. The bigger the network is and the more resources the individuals who compose it possess, the more social capital would be available to the individuals in the network. Bourdieu explained that a *network* is formed by the relationships between people in a group. These relationships are produced either through some “initial or ongoing material or symbolic exchange”, or by being “socially instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name...such as a school.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Over time, the relationships solidify into a group, at which point, social capital emerges as a resource that can be utilized.

Bourdieu’s work reveals that schools, much like associations, function as an important source of social capital because they are constituted of a network from which social capital can emerge. Additionally, he shows that the type and amount of resources available in a network depends upon the people who compose it; the more capital individuals within the network own, the more that is available for everyone else in the network. The same can be said for schools. For instance, schools that are composed of students who come from wealthy families are often rich in resources and therefore can readily offer those resources to other students in the school who need them. Schools and students without access to this network would suffer in comparison because they would have less access to said resources. Still, this perspective only considers the economic resources individuals would gain from their network, rather than the intangible resources that are valuable to learning that would emerge from the relationships between different students in a school. The latter assumes that all students have the potential to offer valuable resources to one another, regardless of their race or class.

Coleman also viewed social capital as emerging from the social relations between people, but he defined it by its functions as opposed to its instrumentality as Bourdieu did. To him, social capital refers to “a variety of entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain action of actors...within the structure.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Social capital is thus anything that drives individual or collective action. He describes the forms that social capital can take in order to facilitate action to be obligations, trust, information channels, and norms. These forms would organize people in such a way as to produce desired outcomes for the group. To illustrate his conception, Coleman points to the role that social capital plays in preventing high school sophomores from dropping out of school. In short, he encourages the creation of “voluntary and spontaneous social organization” that in the past has been a major source of social capital because it offers students the resources he describes as the forms of social capital above.[[27]](#footnote-27) Coleman’s analysis of social capital differs from Bourdieu’s in that it assumes social capital to be neutral concept; whether or not it is put to good use depends on the desired action of the group. In the case of this paper, one could say that social capital is being used for the purpose of improving student learning.

Then, Robert Putnam (2000) translates the qualitative texture of social capital conceptualized by Tocqueville, Dewey, Bourdieu and Coleman and turns it into a quantifiable argument “about the density of groups, individual acts, attitudes and behaviors” in one of his most well-known books, *Bowling Alone*.[[28]](#footnote-28) In this book, Putnam asks whether civic associations, volunteerism, and community in America are in decline and if so, why. He answers these questions through a quantitative analysis of the stock of social capital, which, in a similar fashion to Coleman, he defines as “connections among individuals -- social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” which improve mutual cooperation.[[29]](#footnote-29) Ultimately, he suggests that connections between people are eroding, which causes a host of negative effects, including an increase in crime, decrease in political participation, and decrease in volunteering. In response, he argues then that Americans ought to find new ways to connect with one another to preserve the nation’s institutions and its civic life. In all, Putnam’s work is especially valuable as it provides an analytical lens for quantifying social capital, which then allows for the development of strategies that can increase it, as is the goal of this paper.

Finally, Gregory Plagens (2011) frames the social capital debate in the context of schools. His argument is that variation in social capital may explain why some students and schools perform better than others. Plagens incorporates the works of Dewey, Hanifan, Coleman, Bourdieu, and Putnam in his literature review and identifies three dimensions of social capital that are relevant to education: networks, norms, and relationships. While the last two dimensions are used in this paper, networks are not considered because they are assumed to exist in the social structure of school itself. The third dimension used in this paper, information, comes from Coleman’s analysis of social capital. To concretize how social capital functions in schools, Plagens offers a list of indicators that teachers and administrators can look to:

1. Individuals in high social capital communities have learned to be more socially *cooperative*.
2. Where individuals take an *interest* in and have *knowledge* of the community and its issues, there is likely to be a norm reinforcing such behavior and active networks facilitating the spread of knowledge.
3. Individuals genuinely *care* about the community and the individuals in it are more likely to engage in community-enhancing behavior.
4. Individuals in high social capital communities are more likely to *identify* with the community and to view this identity favorably.
5. Individuals in solidaristic communities will be more inclined to *trust* others in their community.
6. Individuals are more willing to *belong to and participate in community groups or associations*.
7. Social capital can be said to be high at the community level when the number and variety of associational groups in the community is high and when community-wide social networks are dense and overlapping.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Like Coleman, Plagens focuses on the social capital that is derived from the community which it is in as opposed to restricting his analysis to the social capital that emerge from the interactions within the school itself. The latter is undertaken in this paper.

**Dimensions of *Social Capital* in Education: Relationships, Information, Norms**

Social capital refers to the resources made available through an individual's social ties that compose their social networks. These resources can also be described as the dimensions of the social capital construct employed in this paper. While social capital is generally conceived to be a multifaceted concept, there are three key dimensions that are most relevant to a student’s education: *information, norms,* and *relationships*. Each of these dimensions work as resources that carry the potential to enhance students’ learning experience or deteriorate it, depending on how they function. These dimensions are defined and explained in this section.

The most powerful resource a student would receive from their social capital is access to *information* that they otherwise may not have had access to by themselves. As Coleman describes, this dimension of social capital exists as the information that specifically “inheres in social relations.”[[31]](#footnote-31) To illustrate, consider a mentorship relationship between a high school student who interns at a hospital in her neighborhood and the doctor who supervises her. By virtue of being formally connected to the doctor through her internship, the student gains access to the rich information the doctor can offer about her day to day experiences. In this case, the student’s social capital gives her access to information that can help her fulfill professional goals. Another example lies in the relationship between a wealthy student whose parents attended college and a low-income student whose parents did not. If they form a relationship, the wealthy student could offer information about the college application process that the low-income student did not know due to his parents’ experiences or because his school did not offer the resources to assist him. Access to information through relationships, then, can help individuals overcome the information deficits in their personal networks.

The second dimension of social capital is *norms*. Norms materialize from the repeated interactions between individuals in a social network and can either function to student’s benefit by encouraging good learning habits, or, diminish their learning experience by encouraging negative behavior. Coleman defines norms as “expectations about action” which express what action is right and which is wrong (1987).[[32]](#footnote-32) These expectations may be imposed by an externally, by an actor like a teacher or administrator, or they may emerge internally, through the natural interactions between students. For instance, in the case of a classroom, an AP teacher may expect their students to turn in their essays on time and communicate when they require some assistance. Students may also come to expect one another to participate in class and encourage each other to do so by asking questions. One of the most important norms is that of trust, which is an essential ingredient to the formation of relationships between students, but also helps facilitate the learning process; students learn from others when they trust them. It is important to note that these norm, as is the case with all norms, is only as strong as the amount of people who actively adhere to it and the strength of the relationships between them.

*Relationships* are included in the social capital construct because they help explain what information flows through a network and the extent to which norms are influential. The quantity of relationships in a network and their strength, meaning how connected individuals feel to one another, affects how information flows in a network and impacts the types of norms that are enforced within the network. To illustrate, if a non-AP student only has relationships with other non-AP students, then they more likely to miss out on the information or the norms that benefit the learning of AP students. However, they would still have access to the information and norms that are relevant to their social group (which is created by their track).

**Bonding and Bridging Social Capital**

Scholars often distinguish between two types of social capital: bonding and bridging.[[33]](#footnote-33) *Bonding (or exclusive) social capital* emerges in tightly-knit social groups in which every individual is intimately connected to everyone else in the group; it functions as the “sociological super glue” that holds groups together. *Bridging (or inclusive) social capital* emerges when individuals from different groups come into contact; it provides “sociological WD-40” of socializing. Each type is distinct in their function and form, but they interact in dynamic ways; an individual can both bond deeply with another individual along some key social dimension and bridge along another that may initially pose social distance between them.

Bonding social capital lies in the social ties between people who are *similar* to one another along some key dimension. This type of social capital would emerge from a group of best friends in high school, between players on a football team, or amongst classmates in an AP classroom. The individuals in these groups share something in common; they may come from the same neighborhood, share an interest in the same extracurricular activity, or may have been placed in the same homeroom class where they are required to spend time together through the year. Once united in a group, individuals are able to bond with another over time and develop bonding social capital, which helps preserve the existence of the group and provides the benefits of support, solidarity, or favors.

Oftentimes however, bonding social capital naturally forms along the dimensions of race and class. That is, students of the same racial or ethnic identity and class often find themselves in the same social group simply because it feels easier. This phenomenon is encapsulated in the social network principle of *homophily*, which is the idea that “contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people.”[[34]](#footnote-34) This principle helps explain why black students will sit at the same lunch table in a white majority school -- they feel more comfortable with people who share such a visible part of their identity and are therefore likely to also share similar experiences. By sitting with each other over an extended period of time and interacting repeatedly, these students are able to form deeper relationships, thus, solidifying their bonding social capital. From this bonding social capital, the students at the table can form study groups, ask one another for help on homework, or simply ask for advice on how to deal with a relationship problem. These relationships become a resource for navigating the challenges they face while in school; some of which are particular to the unique challenges they face as black students in a majority white school. Bonding social capital, however, poses a problem when it prevents students from forming relationships across difference, or bridging social capital.

The process of bridging social capital lies in creating social ties between individuals who are *different* from one another along some key dimension(s). While bonding social capital can offer security and trust, bridging social capital can yield additional benefits to the individual because it offers access to resources from new social networks that they otherwise would not have access to on their own. An example of this is an athlete befriending a thespian who is in the same book club and inviting him to a basketball game. The thespian may invite the athlete to a theater production in return. Another example is a wealthy, Latina student meeting a low-income, white student at a statewide student council meeting and inviting him to her house for menudo and tortillas de maiz. In each case, the relationship between students who are seemingly different from one is born from participation in some collective activity or voluntary association that effectively work to bridge differences. Their relationship in turn offers each person access and knowledge about a new social world, which enhances their learning and understanding of other groups of people.

Bridging social capital is more difficult to form because it requires that individuals overcome their differences, but it is often more valuable. In cities, for example, bridging social capital can reduce economic inequality as well as increase productivity “by improving access for excluded or historically disadvantaged ‘out-groups’ to “information, endorsements, preparation, mentoring, and other keys to career success.”[[35]](#footnote-35) In effect, connections between people of different classes work against the social barriers that are often entrenched by economic inequality. Bridging social capital is also important in politics, because it helps develop “broader political identities and broader communities of interest (Blau and Schwartz 1984; Simmel 1955).”[[36]](#footnote-36) In other words, it can help expand the social scope of solidarity in movements. Additionally, Briggs goes as far as to claim that bridging social capital functions as the “key foundation of power sharing” which is essential to the operation of democratic government (Lipset 1994). Democracy works only when power is shared amongst all the people who compose it, as opposed to solely being wielded by a wealthy, white elite.

Bonding and bridging social capital are fluid concepts. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather, interact in dynamic way. Much of the difference between bonding or bridging depends on perceived identity; a black Democrat may connect with a white Democrat at a political rally because they share a political identity, but they may diverge at a Black Lives Matter rally due to their different racial identities; a white AP student may get along with a black AP student in class, but they may choose to sit at different tables during lunch. As Putnam explains, bridging depends on “finding, emphasizing, or creating a new dimension of similarity within which bonding can occur.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Identifying these new dimensions can construct “cross-cutting identities” that “enable connection across perceived diversity.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Thus, bridging social capital can be transformed into bonding social capital once a new social identity that incorporates diverse people has been imagined by a group. Imagining new identities is an intentional process that requires the investment of every individual involved.

It is important to note that social capital formation is affected by social structure, as the dimensions of this structure impacts how individuals identify themselves and how they choose to interact with one another. In the case of students, for example, the creation of their social capital is affected by the classes they are in, the extracurriculars they participate in, and their neighborhood. If they are separated by students who are different than them on the basis of race or class because of segregation or racialized tracking, then it becomes much more difficult for them to build bridging social capital as opposed to bonding; they would still be able to form bonding social capital with students who share a common identity and similar experiences but lose the opportunity to interact with different students. Thus, schools can structurally create or destroy bonding or bridging social capital, depending on how they design the social experience.

***OBSTACLES THAT LIMIT BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL***

Students across the country are losing the capacity to cultivate bridging social capital for two key reasons: first, schools have been *resegregating* for the last decade and second, they are racially isolating students through the process of *racialized tracking*. The combination of these two phenomena is diminishing and/or limiting spaces for students of different backgrounds to connect and are reproducing the social barriers erected by the structure of their schools or classrooms. This section explains the emergence of this problem and its relationship to students’ ability to cultivate bridging social capital.

**Reemergence of School Segregation**

School segregation structurally limits the development of bridging social capital by spatially generating social barriers between different groups of students. Research defines isolated schools as those where 75% or more of the students are of the same race or class. There has been extensive research on the relationship between neighborhood segregation and school segregation and how each have been rising the past decade. For example, from 2000 to 2014, the percentage of public schools where nearly all the students are poor and black or Hispanic more than doubled.[[39]](#footnote-39) This is partially because school districts across the country are “abandoning” the court-ordered desegregation plans of the 1960s and 1970s and are gradually becoming segregated again.[[40]](#footnote-40) Several white neighborhoods and cities have attempted to “secede” and “form their own, all-white districts.”[[41]](#footnote-41) This means that more students across the country are attending schools that are racially homogenous.

Since the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, education researchers have demonstrated the number of ways that school segregation negatively affects students’ education.[[42]](#footnote-42) A segregated learning environment can make students believe they are not smart, inform teachers’ low expectations of poor students of color, and cause lower academic achievement on tests.[[43]](#footnote-43) In addition, residential segregation by race “acts as a barrier to the formation of bridging social ties.” This is because spatial segregation also causes “social segregation” which come in the form of social barriers that isolate low-income, people of color, from “useful connections to job advice, scholarship recommendations, and other forms of aid.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Conversely, research has also shown the various benefits an integrated environment can offer. Children who learn in an integrated environment tend to have higher standardized test scores, can gain the ability to communicate across difference, and have a higher chance at matriculating into a four year university.[[45]](#footnote-45) The problem is that school districts often shy away from the difficult work of racial integration.[[46]](#footnote-46)

**Racialized Tracking as a Segregation Mechanism**

Another problem that is rarely discussed in education circles is that of *racialized tracking*. Even if a school is desegregated, students are often segregated in the classroom through a process called ‘tracking,’ in which students are grouped by assessed intellectual ability. This division usually manifests itself in AP versus non-AP classes. Although on the surface it may seem logical to group students based on their intellectual ability, “school districts [often] use whites’ higher average achievement (a disparity to which tracking no doubt contributes) to justify the segregation.”[[47]](#footnote-47) In other words, tracking creates a race and class hierarchy within schools that project the idea that white students are more intelligent than students in color to the student body. This means that even if you are in the same school, you inhabit different social worlds. Even when black and white students have access to the schools, “they often do not have access to the same curriculum,” and they are made feel less intelligent as a result.[[48]](#footnote-48) This problem is expressed in the fact that black students are disproportionately underrepresented in gifted programs and in advance courses.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Racialized tracking has several negative effects on the learning of students of color, including their self-perception and motivation to work in school. Tyson’s study reveals that racialized tracking causes black students to denounce academic achievement as “acting white” as a means of rejecting a system that has rejected them. This explanation is in opposition to the idea that black students perform lower than white students because of their culture. Rather, black students are behaving in response to a system that systematically undervalues them. Being exposed to racialized tracking repeatedly creates “beliefs about a relationship between race and achievement (and intelligence)” that black and white students act on.[[50]](#footnote-50) As Tyson shows, this system forces some students to endure the damage from a system that “they neither created nor consented to, a system that demonstrably determines winners and losers based on their race and class.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

 de Souza Briggs directly links the problems caused by tracking to eliminating bridging social capital. As de Souza Briggs shows, black students who attend racially and socioeconomically diverse schools in higher income neighborhoods gain a resource that low-income black students in poor segregated schools do not: “the product of the diverse and useful social networks, cross-cutting cultural skills, and even the psychological resources for managing one’s own minority status in the presence of a majority group.”[[52]](#footnote-52) However, students may lose the value of this resource if they attend a school that is tracked, has extracurriculars that fail to bridge across groups, or encourage exclusionary peer groups that thwart bridges.

In the conclusion of her book, Tyson passionately postulates why older generations continually pass down the responsibility of racial progress to the youth as opposed to taking it upon themselves. She points that adults ought to work together to change the structures that cause racial division in society, in this case, racialized tracking. She asks, “why should [students] be capable of meaningful interracial relationships when we neither encourage such relationships nor systematically provide the space required for them to develop?”[[53]](#footnote-53) Her critique reveals that schools are not doing the work of building bridging social capital. Schools that support this system bear the “responsibility for the growth of inter- and intra-group resentment.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

***DEVELOPING A BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL STRATEGY***

As of now, “schools are doing little to foster and cultivate healthy meaningful cross-racial relationships.”[[55]](#footnote-55) However, as both Tyson and de Souza highlight, schools can lead the movement toward a “a truly integrated society” if they intentionally design social structures and programs that connect different students together.[[56]](#footnote-56) To do so, schools ought to help combat the mechanisms that segregate students by implementing a combination of bridging social capital strategies. While strategies to build social capital have been developed in the context of community building, there has been little research on how to design and execute bridging social capital strategies within schools.[[57]](#footnote-57) This is partially because creating social structures and programs that specifically aim to cultivate bridging social capital is a difficult task; it “implies being both systematic and selective and implies formalizing, somewhat, the means for enabling, creating, or sustaining an intrinsically informal resource.”[[58]](#footnote-58) As de Souza Briggs explains, schools cannot force students to build bridging friendships, but there is hope in that they “can be fostered.”[[59]](#footnote-59) To address this challenge, this paper applies the bridging social capital framework developed above to three areas of potential change: policy, programs, and practice. Each recommendation attempts to maximize the dimensions of social capital described earlier; to maximize the flow of information between social groups, to establish norms that value diversity, and to directly build relationships among different students. The recommendations given in each area apply at the high school level but may be adapted to fit middle and elementary schools as well. The basis of these strategies lies in creating a shared space and shared experience for all students.

**I. POLICY: Creating Space and Establishing Structural Support for Integration**

1. *Commitment to Integration*School districts should ask their staff and members of the community to commit to the cause of integrating their student body by signing a pledge or agreement that was created by consensus. To accomplish this goal, schools should host a series of townhall meetings to identify the problems caused by racial segregation across schools and in the classroom and discuss the potential benefits of integration. Afterwards, school administrators should meet with key actors in the community to discuss what strategies to execute in pursuit of the goal of integration. The key in this strategy is to secure buy-in for the process of building bridging social capital from everyone involved, particularly parents, and to create a mechanism for maintaining accountability.
2. *School Desegregation*
School districts in which the majority of schools are segregated ought to implement a desegregation plan in order to produce integrated schools. There are a variety of ways that schools can accomplish this goal which are discussed past research.[[60]](#footnote-60) Desegregation is an essential first step in the creation of a shared space for students of different racial and class backgrounds. Schools must tackle the spatial barriers erected by neighborhood segregation in order to give students the opportunity to interact and build bridges across difference. The goal of this plan must explicitly be integration as opposed to just desegregation. This means that administrators and staff must also be committed to actively integrating student groups through programs and in practice.
3. *Eliminate or Mitigate Racialized Tracking*
School districts should consider eliminating tracking altogether so as not to create and reproduce social barriers between white students and students of color as described by Tyson. Instead, school districts should explore implementing alternative classroom organization strategies such as *cooperative learning*, which groups students with mixed ability and focuses “instructional approaches to capitalize on diversity.”[[61]](#footnote-61) This strategy is particularly effective for fostering bridging social capital because it helps students form a “shared group identity” and a “sense of unity,” which is essential in overcoming perceived differences.[[62]](#footnote-62)
4. *Designing Space for Connection*
Schools should design physical and social spaces that facilitate *collisions*, or chance encounters and unplanned interactions, between students, faculty, and administrators.[[63]](#footnote-63) Putnam highlights that “common spaces for commonplace encounters are prerequisites for common conversations and common debate,” and these spaces help reinforce a “sense of obligation and extend the boundaries of empathy.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Research shows that businesses who designed spaces with collisions in mind saw a boost in productivity and innovation. Schools could also consider increasing the amount of time in between classes or providing students with a longer lunch period to offer them the opportunity to converse with their classmates.
5. *Create Support Structures for Integration*
School districts should increase investment for mental health services and counseling in desegregated schools to provide students with support in the integration process. These services are especially important for minority students who attend majority white schools because they experience social challenges that are unique to their racial identity. Providing these services would help students cultivate bridging social capital by making them feel supported by the school, by increasing their comfort in social settings in which they are the minority, and by providing them the tools to communicate across difference.
6. *Increase Hiring of Diverse Staff*School districts should increase the hiring of staff from diverse backgrounds (race, class, and gender) and “create a school-based pathway” for “training and hiring from within the local community” for two reasons: First, because it would help students feel represented in the faculty of the school which would make them feel more confident in their social interactions and second, because teachers from diverse backgrounds could have insightful experiences they could draw on to help advise students on how to build relationships across different social dimensions.[[65]](#footnote-65) If a school district is committed to increasing bridging capital in the student body, then the same goal should also be reflected in staff hiring.

**II. PROGRAMMING: Forming Connections**

1. *First-Year Groups[[66]](#footnote-66)*
Schools should organize incoming first-year students into ‘first-year groups’ before school starts to give them the opportunity to meet new people and to learn about high school. Teachers could nominate rising seniors to lead the groups who would then be responsible for integrating the group of students into the school by hosting discussions and workshops about academic and social life. Teachers and staff could work with the seniors to create meaningful events and programs in which the first-year groups could interact. In essence, this strategy would “create a cellular structure with smaller groups linked to form a larger, more encompassing one,” which in effect, facilitates both “mixing” and “bridging” among small groups.[[67]](#footnote-67) This social structure provides the benefit of “intimacy” within the small group and “breadth” when the groups interact. [[68]](#footnote-68)
2. *Fireside Chats[[69]](#footnote-69)*
The purpose of this chat is to create an open forum for students to share how they feel about the school years and to encourage reflection about themselves and their peers. This would offer them the chance to share stories, which are a powerful tool for creating bridging social capital. As Putnam explains, stories can bridge “social distance” and “help people construct and reconstruct their interests.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Teachers would host a fireside at least twice a semester to encourage repeated interactions between students. Repeating this process through the year would help students “create empathy” and will help them “find the things they have in common, which then eases the formation of enduring groups and networks.”[[71]](#footnote-71) A similar model may be adopted for parents.
3. *Mix it Up at Lunch Day*
School districts should participate in the Mix It Up at Lunch Day Campaign which is a program that encourages students to “identify, question and cross social boundaries.”[[72]](#footnote-72) In this program, students are assigned to sit at a specific lunch table with other students they are not friends with and are asked to engage in positive conversations. Teachers and administrators will often market this day over the course of a week and will invite performers, DJs, and dancers to transform the event into a celebration. This strategy would make students feel excited about the possibility of making new friends, and thus, building bridging social capital.
4. *Extracurricular Recruitment*
Teachers and staff that lead extracurricular activities should intentionally diversify their groups by increasing outreach to students who usually do not join their activity. To accomplish this, teachers and students can work together on social media marketing and in-person campaigns. Diversifying these activities would give students another opportunity to make friends over a shared experience.
5. *Parent Community Dinners*
School districts should work with parents from different communities (i.e. race or class) to organize monthly community dinners and encourage them to discuss a variety of topics that are interesting and relevant to them. The school district should offer financial support to help organize the events in order to prevent low-income families from participating. It is important for parents to also connect with one another because their perspective informs how their child views different social groups and therefore affects how they choose to interact with different people. If parents agree that building bridging social capital is important, then their child is more likely to also believe the same.
6. *Mentorship Programs*
Schools should organize mentorship programs by reaching out to members of the community, including local businesses, churches, and nonprofits and matching them with students. Mentors could offer academic and professional information but would also focus on building a genuine relationship with the student. These relationships could help students learn how to better communicate across difference by providing them the structure and space to reflect on how they relate to their mentors.

**III. PRACTICE: Sustaining Integration**

1. *Encouraging Connection*
Teachers should encourage connections by intentionally grouping students who are not friends together during in-class activities. This would require observation of what student groups already exist and an awareness of how they change over time. Working together on assignments help students build bonds, but also exposes them to different styles of learning. In addition, teachers can do the work of building a cross-cutting identity in their classroom, by “reframing individual trajectories as a collective tale,” that is, a tale of each students’ educational journey into a tale of the classroom’s journey, which in turn, transforms “bridging distance into bonding ties”.[[73]](#footnote-73) This could be done by setting a norm of cooperation instead of competition, in which every student is invested in their classmates’ success. Teachers could reward cooperative behavior in the classroom to set this norm.
2. *Explaining Difference*
Teachers should be intentional about explaining social differences between students and provide them with rhetorical strategies for talking about these differences. This could be done in a series of workshops or lessons in which teachers explain problems such as implicit bias and institutionalized racism and provide suggestions for overcoming them in conversation. Having the proper language to communicate across difference is an important part of building bridging social capital because relationships require rhetorical affirmations to be sustained.
3. *Curriculum Choice*
Teachers should include content in their curriculum that reflects the diversity of their classrooms to make students feel represented in their school and society. This means highlighting marginalized voices in a social studies curriculum to demonstrate that society is composed of multiple stories instead of the dominant one.

***LIMITATIONS***

There are certainly limitations to how effective these strategies can be as it is still difficult to accurately quantify how social capital affects learning. Measurement would largely depend on the subjective perspective of teachers, administrators, and staff. For instance, it may be difficult for teachers and administrators to measure or observe the relationships between social groups in the school and make meaningful decisions based on the limited information they gather. It is also unclear how school staff would track their progress over time – how would they know when a student has accrued the optimal amount of bridging social capital? How can a teacher measure the amount of information a student receives about the college application process, for example, from their friends? Even if an accurate measurement system is developed, it is difficult to know how parents would respond to this combination of strategies; they may feel uncomfortable about the school forcing their child to befriend other students. These questions provide grounds for further research.

***CONCLUSION***

Recognizing that education is indeed a social process serves as a reminder that the relationships students form in school *matter*. Who they choose to connect with has long-term consequences on what they learn and how they learn it. The social capital construct functions as a useful analytical tool for examining this idea, how social ties and the resources they offer – information, norms, and relationships – affect the learning process of students. Ultimately, students benefit when they have access to high amounts of social capital, but they stand to gain even more when they attain *bridging social capital*, or, the resources that emerge from their connections to students who are different than them along key social dimensions. Unfortunately, students’ ability to accrue bridging social capital is severely limited when they are forced to learn in an environment that is segregated because of residential segregation and racialized tracking. This is true for white students who attend mostly white, wealthy schools and student of color who attend mostly minority, low-income schools. Students lose in both situations. If schools are idealized to be an equalizing force in society, then part of their project ought to be to provide a space for the development of bridging relationships; so that students can learn from one another, support each other, and provide resources when they need it. Unless schools actively work to heal the social divisions that permeate society today, our social fabric will continue to rip apart.

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63. Greg Lindsay, Jennifer Magnolfi, and Ben Waber, *Workspaces That Move People*, Harvard Business Review. Harvard Business Publishing. October 2014. A case-study of a business named Zappos HQ showed that an increase in collisions led to a 78% increase in participant-generated proposals to solve specific problems and an 84% increase in the number of new leaders – participants who initiated work and collaboration and developed project scope and objectives. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein*. Better Together: Restoring the American Community*. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Debs, Mira. “Best practices to create and maintain diverse student enrollments & empowered parents.” In *Diverse, Parents, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in an Era of School Choice.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. This structure is employed across Yale College. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein*. Better Together: Restoring the American Community*. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. This program is used by the residential college system at Yale College. It is normally hosted by the dean and head of college and is usually mandatory for students of the same class to attend. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein*. Better Together: Restoring the American Community*. 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Teaching Tolerance. *Mix It Up Lunch Day*. Southern Poverty Law Center. 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein*. Better Together: Restoring the American Community*. 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)