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Mentor Social Capital, Individual Agency and Working-class Student Learning Outcomes: Revisiting the Structure/Agency Dialectic

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Abstract: This investigation explores factors that contributed to the disparate learning identities of two white baby-boomer brothers from the same working-class family. The research, part of a broader phenomenological study into the influences of working-class masculinities and schooling offers an insight into the individual family members' differential communities of practice that over time had the potential to affect each brother's accumulation and utilization of specific forms of social capital. The research challenges conventional thinking regarding the role families play in reproducing educational inequality because it recognizes that an individual's responses to multiple experiences both within and outside the family, rather than family influence alone, are the best means of understanding certain social effects on a student's formal schooling (Goldthorpe, 1983; Phelan, Davidson and Cao, 1991).

Introduction

This paper is a case analysis of two brothers who participated in a wider qualitative, phenomenological, narrative investigation into the formal learning identities of white baby-boomer males. The brothers were selected as a consequence of certain aspects that emerged from an earlier analysis of the collected biographical narrative data. Information gained from the younger sibling Ox, both in a focus group and during a subsequent individual interview, was influential in determining the particular themes and the theoretical approaches used to analyze them. The research data show that some of the most important experiences on an individual's educational decision making occurred at the interpersonal or micro level. When non-familial others took an interest in an individual's education the effect on his schooling outcomes were positive. The case study reflects the importance of both the positive and negative influences of non-familial relationships on one's educational experiences. It is also argued that mentor social capital can provide the disaffected student, regardless of their cultural or social origins, a belief in and capacity to attain his academic potential.

This case study is significant because it reveals the voices of two baby-boomer men from the same working-class family. The analysis follows a similar approach, adopted by Connidis (2007) in which research respondents with critical comparableness in relation to family structure and generational experiences are selected from a wider sample group. The two individuals in this specific case analysis were chosen in order to compare the impact of each sibling's personal relationships, both within and outside the family, on his schooling. This type of analysis according to Connidis provides certain explanations for variations in sibling learning outcomes while at the same time eliminating others.

Focusing on two voices from the same family made it possible to analyze and interpret aspects of the working-class learning phenomenon that could not have been achieved had the analysis been restricted to only the experiences of the other individuals who were involved in the wider investigation. Revealing the views of the two men in this case study shows the significance

of subjectivity; its importance in understanding individual agency and the social processes involved in shaping one's identity (Bottrell, 2009). The notion of agency as it is expressed in this research recognizes that the brothers more or less had control over their own educational decision making rather than accept that their actions were entirely contingent on surrounding social structures (Gordon, 2005; Roberts, 1997).

The brothers

Ox is fifty-one and an ex-Telstra employee who identifies himself as retired. He is married with three children and lives on a twenty-five acre property on Sydney's rural fringe. The brothers both attended the same outer-Sydney western suburbs state high school during the late sixties and early seventies. Ox completed half of Third Year before he was expelled at the age of fourteen. Ox doesn't consider himself religious and his personal income is under \$30,000 per annum.

Billy is fifty-four, teaches casually in Adelaide and is married with two daughters. Billy's highest educational qualifications are a PhD, Master of Education and a Master of Letters. Billy describes himself as an atheist. The brothers are the middle siblings from a family of eight children: five boys and three girls. Their father was a bricklayer and their mother a housewife. At the time the family migrated to Australia from England in 1959, under the Assisted Passage Migration Scheme, Ox was three and Billy had just turned five.

The family

As a social institution the family is usually acknowledged as a haven for its members (Connidis, 2007). Families are assumed to be the most significant influence on a student's academic outcomes (Ferrante, 2008; Fukuyama, 1997; Putnam, 2000). Coleman (1988) suggests that parents and peers are more important in a child's education than schools. Families are also recognized as perpetuating inequalities in society (Bourdieu, 1977; Gilles, 1996).

Social differences occurring within families are often explored at an intergenerational level, although intra-generational disparity in social outcomes within a family unit is not uncommon (Connidis, 2007). Researchers have tended to concentrate on the potential intergenerational social mobility of families i.e. children's movement away from the educational, economic and social position of their parents. An emphasis on intergenerational mobility however often overlooks the life variations that can take place among same-age cohorts in a family. In some families unequal access to a variety of resources among siblings can be substantial (Conley, 2004, Connidis; 2007; Hauser, Sheridan and Warren, 1999) and despite individuals being raised within a shared-class position, the possibility of differences in social, economic and educational outcomes among members of the same family cannot be discounted (Connidis, 2007).

Although research on student learning outcomes has generally focused on the socioeconomic status of a child's family, studies from disciplines other than sociology suggest an individual's learning may also be affected by characteristics such as a family's size; its composition and the interaction among its members (Oettinger, 2000). Zajonc (1976) for example argues that birth order, age spacing and gender within a single family unit make

differences in sibling development predictable.

An individual's experiences are lived at the micro social level. This level of experience however is related to wider macro and meso social contexts. Macro social relations such as class, gender, age and policy interconnect with meso institutions such as families, schools and local communities to help shape an individual's perceptions of reality (Connidis, 2007; Heinze, 2001; O'Rand, 2001). Understanding the nature of differences between siblings requires knowledge of how these three social levels can cumulatively affect individuals (Connidis, 2007). Macro level social influences such as historical context, gender, class and age, along with meso level influences, like the physical and emotional composition of a family, affect the micro level interpersonal relationships of individuals. The combination of these levels of influence can help explain differences in the social and educational outcomes among siblings (Connidis, 2007).

Individual family members exercise agency by either distancing themselves from certain situations and relationships or by giving ground to the perspectives and experiences of others within as well as outside the family (Finch, 1989). For example one son leaves school early to get a job because he is conscious of the financial pressure his family is under. An older sibling from the same family takes the advice of a school teacher and decides to stay at school to complete his Leaving Certificate in spite of the family's financial difficulties. As individuals, siblings are able to construct either diverse or strong relationships that potentially generate or restrict their access to social networks (Connidis, 2007; Finch, 1989). The diversity in personal experiences of siblings can create very different life trajectories among members of the same family. Of significance to this study are the different levels of access to social capital by the siblings during their formative years and the influences of such access on the individuals' educational decision making and schooling outcomes.

Methodology

The study specifically examined the role of personal relationships both familial and non-familial in the schooling experiences of the two white baby-boomer men. Data gathered from focus group and individual qualitative in-depth interviews were analyzed and interpreted to identify the significant people and experiences in each brother's education. The interpretive paradigm underpinned the way in which the data were collected and defined. A hypothesis was not formulated and there was no intention to either prove or disprove a proposition. Data were collected and synthesized inductively to develop generalizations about the working-class phenomenon being investigated (McMillan, 2004). Criteria for participation in the broader research were that each individual was: male, white, a baby-boomer with at least a minimum level of secondary education and at some point in his life identified himself as working class. The data were third-person narratives constructed from text-based interview transcripts. The unstructured responses of the brothers were organized into individual biographies which were read and interpreted using a thematic approach (Lovett, 2013). Ricoeur's (1976) theory of explanation, understanding and interpretation informed this part of the analytical process. A social capital framework was used to understand the effect of parents, siblings, peers and other individuals in shaping the brothers' schooling outcomes.

Social capital

Bourdieu's (1977, 1980, 1999) concepts of capital and habitus tend to stress structure over agency and as such fail to account for the changes in an individual's life history or the differences that occur in the lives of members from a single family (MacLeod, 2000). Giddens (1991) says the lives of adolescents are often characterized by cultural ruptures and argues that young people are able to demonstrate their individualism through self-expression and reflection. What follows analyzes data, using various theories of social capital that include both its positive functions and negative consequences.

Social capital not only includes social networks such as assets and resources to which individuals have access (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988) but also involves people with certain expertise and influence. These people can be a conduit to specific knowledge, cultural capital and economic resources for those whose inherited cultural and social position may limit their access to such things (Jarrett, Sullivan and Watkins, 2005). As a concept social capital can be somewhat difficult to nail down because of its application within multiple fields and to any number of diverse events (Portes, 1998). The study of group dynamics is a long established area of sociological interest and social capital as a heuristic device has traditionally been characterized by: both its preoccupation with the positive rather than negative aspects of sociability, and the notion that power and influence can be acquired through means other than monetary (Portes, 1998). According to Portes the concept has widened from an attribute generally identified with individuals and families to something that can also be associated with local communities, states and even nations (Fukuyama, 1997; Putnam, 2000).

Conceptually social capital is often used by sociologists of education to describe the set of resources that is conducive to the educational outcomes of youths (Kao, 2004). Coleman (1988) identified social capital as something that develops from the relationships between people. Shared norms and trust that contribute to the resourcing of others are forms of social capital (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001). According to Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2005) social capital is a means of staving off social disadvantage. Contemporary understandings of social capital are not dissimilar to Dewey's (1938) concept of experience and continuity in which the experience one develops is a consequence of his access to the experience of others.

A diversity of resources becomes available to an individual through his relationships with other people. These resources according to Coleman (1988) include: obligations and expectations, information channels and social norms. Obligations and expectations usually arise from relationships between individuals. Expectations and obligations therefore cannot be exchanged between people who lack friends and associates. To function well individuals and organizations require access to information. Students for example need to understand about schools, and the communities in which the schools operate, in order to obtain information. Teachers, students, parents and other individuals who interact within the school community possess skills and knowledge that can benefit student learning outcomes although accessing information from others is not always easy (Coleman, 1988; Edwards, Franklin and Holland, 2003).

It is said that working-class students suffer at school in different ways because their families are unfamiliar with the social norms associated with mainstream education (Bernstein, 1970; Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Connell, 1993). Schools often promote academic achievement through norms that reward positive conduct and sanction negative behavior.

Obligations and expectations when combined with social norms can be effective in controlling individual action. Unlike other types of capital which can become exhausted individuals tend to retain social capital. In fact social capital in the form of personal ties often increases with use and the relationships an individual has with influential others help strengthen that person's social ties (Coleman, 1988; Kao, 2004). An individual's access to a diversity of support is invaluable for obtaining information and assistance within an educational environment. This access also offers a person the means in which to develop new social networks (Holland, Reynolds and Weller, 2007).

Bourdieu looks at relationships within families and the processes of social capital somewhat less formulaically than Coleman. According to Bourdieu theoretical concepts such as social capital need to be polymorphic and adaptive instead of rigid (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Social capital is something that requires ongoing effort. It results from conscious or unconscious individual or collective strategies that are aimed at giving rise to or reproducing useable short or long-term social relationships. The connections that constitute social capital are accumulated over time and transmitted from one generation to the next. Bourdieu's view is that cultural capital and social capital are inextricably linked particularly in relation to education. What an individual gains from education is dependent to a large extent on his family's previous cultural investments (Bourdieu, 1985).

As already noted parents are often cited as the most influential sources of support in their children's education, however a lack of educational credentials and experience, in the practices of mainstream education, is said to restrict the amount of help working-class parents are able to offer their children (Bernstein, 1970; Sanchez, Reyes and Singh, 2005). This research similarly acknowledges the influence parents have on their children's educational outcomes but also recognizes the impact of support that individuals can and do attract outside the context of the family. The way in which adolescents are drawn to the practices of particular peer-groups for example is well documented in past research (Coleman, 1963; Varenne, 1982). According to Bassani (2007) the analysis of adolescent networks beyond those of the family is somewhat underdeveloped in contemporary research. The interrelationships an individual experiences with family, the local community and school demonstrate the dynamic relation of social capitals that exists among different social groups (Bottrell, 2009).

Analysis

Although the brothers in this study are from a shared working-class background their educational stories differ significantly. Each had access to different forms of social capital, both positive and negative, which in turn affected the way he expressed his individual sense of agency. The social capital to which the older brother Billy had access for example was located in social contexts that offered very different educational opportunities to those of his younger brother Ox. As a consequence the family, friends and school had distinctive meanings for each of the men.

Success in formal education is often aligned with attaining academic credentials (Sanchez et al. 2006). This study specifically examined the role significant others played in helping or restricting the brothers to become academically credentialed. The personal relationships each of the brothers established with people both within and outside the family give an insight into the positive and negative forms of social capital that impacted on the brothers' academic outcomes.

The men's narratives helped identify not only the areas of education they considered necessary for academic success but also the characteristics of others the brothers believed were important when it came to educational decision making.

Sanchez et al. (2006) indicate that educational support for students is manifested in various ways including: having access to academic advice, knowing that others are taking an interest in who students are and what they do, being provided with emotional, experiential and informational support, as well as receiving encouragement and having people listen to what the students have to say. Of particular importance in this study was the capacity of significant others to either motivate or discourage the men's learning.

Both Ox and Billy indicated that their parents had a limited positive influence on them regarding education. *Billy recalls that his family had an intense dislike of schools because schools were often places of conflict between teachers and his brothers and sisters. As far as the majority of Billy's family was concerned leaving age for them couldn't arrive soon enough; teachers undoubtedly felt the same. The family's opinion of teachers and that of teachers' for some members of Billy's family, to say the least, was fairly low. It is therefore somewhat ironic that Billy became a school teacher. Displays of affection by Billy's parents such as hugging their kids were never expressed. Schooling or sporting achievements by any of the children were rarely acknowledged within the family. The kids learnt to keep their personal successes to themselves* (Billy: Sydney, 2008).

The lack of recognition by Billy's parents for what he was accomplishing both academically and in sport may account for his connectedness with individuals outside the family who acknowledged his achievements and offered him encouragement. Billy's motivation to stay at high school was mostly a consequence of non-familial networks. Coleman (1988) identifies intergenerational relationships, particularly those between parents and their children, as an important source of social capital. According to Coleman, parents' expectations regarding their children's education are an investment in what the next generation can provide the parents in later life (Edwards, Franklin and Holland, 2003). This aspect of generating social capital however appears less significant within the brothers' family. Of particular importance to this study is Coleman's view that the greater the number of children in a family the less attention each of the children receives. Bourdieu (1985) similarly identifies a mother's ability to devote time to her children as one of many ways that social capital can be transmitted inter-generationally. According to Smith et al. (1995) familial social capital includes both structure and process. The frequency and duration of parents' personal interactions with their children can be affected by structural characteristics such as the number of siblings in a family as well as the presence or absence of both parents. Process on the other hand is represented by the quality and level of parents' involvement in their children's lives (Israel et al. 2001). The fact the brothers are from a family of eight children may account for why both Ox and Billy were receptive to the attention that was afforded them outside the family. Perhaps this was a means by which the brothers compensated for the lack of attention they received from their parents.

The level of social capital attributed to families is subject to historical fluctuations and is an aspect particularly applicable to the retrospective baby-boomer context of this research. Familial social capital is responsive to the structure of families. According to Leigh and Putnam (2002) the best social capitalists were the baby-boomer generation of stay at home women. The researchers argue that an increased participation of women in the workforce, and the rise of dual income families have weakened the traditional bonds of the nuclear and extended family. As a consequence the level of social capital generated within families, particularly by women, has

also declined (Leigh and Putnam, 2002). The brothers were from a background that reflected the traditional family structure to which Leigh and Putnam allude nonetheless a variable such as the large number of children in the brothers' family demonstrates how children's access to familial social capital, no matter what a family's class position, can be affected.

Like Billy, Ox's learning decisions were influenced by the variety of contexts in which he interacted. There was an intersection of both positive and negative social capital in the form of Ox's personal ties. The following example illustrates how Ox also demonstrated his agency through the allegiances he developed with social networks other than those within the family or school. *Ox's primary teacher booked him into a special thing called a bursary because Ox must have been good at maths at one time. For some reason or other Ox was selected..... Ox started getting these books with all these sums in them and he thought, "What's this?"*

"Oh that's what you've got to take home. You've got to start doing all that at home." When Ox looked into it he thought, "I don't think I want to play this game," because while he was in doing his sums his mates were out doing their fun thing. It was pretty hard stuff and because Ox didn't really want to apply himself he thought, "No I'm not going to do this." He can remember his mum saying, "Come on you've got to get in here and start doing this work." Ox kicked up a bit of a stink and said, "No I don't want to do this." He then had to go back to Mr W and tell him what to do with his bursary business (Ox: Sydney, 2008).

Ox's rejection of the opportunities that were provided by a particular teacher, and partially supported by his mother, could be construed as typical of that expressed by working-class boys (Willis, 1977). His suspicion regarding the teacher's motives dissuaded him from taking advantage of the positive social capital that had been made available to him at school. His relationships with peers, an example of negative social capital, were one aspect that helped to determine the direction in which his learning headed.

Ox's story indicates the significance of social networking among peers. The influence of Ox's friends on his decision making increased as he moved on to high school. *A couple of Ox's mates were a bit dodgy and used to like to borrow people's cars. They pulled up at the front of his place in a stolen FJ Holden to drive him to school. Ox told them, "Don't pull up outside, pull up down the street because me old man will know what you're up to." He then jumped in the car and was driven to school (Ox: Sydney, 2008).*

Mentors

Of specific relevance to this study is the role of mentoring relationships in the academic experiences of individuals. Mentoring relationships in academic achievement are important because they represent a significant form of social capital (Sanchez et al. 2006). Billy's educational success was in part the result of a mentor who took a particular interest in his schooling. This person was a former primary school teacher, who wanted to help Billy develop academically. The mentor provided Billy with motivation to continue with school when it appeared likely that Billy would drop out.

One evening Billy's mum was hit by his dad who'd come home from the RSL club drunk. Billy stepped in to defend his mother and ended up having a fist fight with his dad. This incident resulted in Billy being thrown out of the house by his father. It was 1971 and Billy had just finished Year Eleven. He took a job as a builder's laborer for a year and ironically it was his father who gave him a job. The physical nature of the work, and an occasional reminder from his

father about bricklaying being ‘a mug’s game’, made Billy consider going back to school to finish his HSC. The former sixth class teacher with whom Billy had remained in contact also urged Billy to return to school (Billy: Sydney, 2008). Billy’s decision to return to school was a consequence of different forms of social capital. The effect of his father’s words regarding the lack of a future in the building industry, combined with the encouragement of his former teacher, were influential in Billy’s decision making.

Sanchez et al.’s (2006) research of Hispanic American adolescents identified the role of mentors in the lives of students. Like Billy the students in Sanchez et al.’s study were provided with the motivation and access to specific forms of help that might not have been attained without a mentor’s intervention. Stanton-Salazar (2001) similarly refers to the significance of institutional agents, both in and outside the family, in the lives of adolescent students. The effect of significant others such as teachers in motivating students to overcome, linguistic, cultural and motivational hurdles has been the focus of a good deal of previous research (Edmonds, 1979; Heath, 1982; Slavin and Madden, 1989; Walberg, 1986).

It is also important to acknowledge the influence of Billy’s friends regarding his decision to finish school. *A number of mates with whom Billy had previously gone to school had fared poorly in the HSC the previous year and made up their minds to return to do Year Thirteen after hearing that Billy was returning to school. Being surrounded by close friends made Billy’s transition from work back to school easier than it might have otherwise been. Billy ended up being the only one among his seven brothers and sisters to go further than Year Ten (Billy: Sydney, 2008).*

Bourdieu (1999) argues that the conscious or unconscious decisions people make are dependent on one’s habitus even when the connections between an individual and his family seem tenuous. The educational decisions of individuals, while at times appearing independent, are often aligned with the class and educational background of one’s family (Walkerline et al. 2001). Such assertions however negate the capacity of individuals, such as the brothers in this study, to assert their own sense of agency. From an identical class position; with an implied shared working-class habitus, each brother was able to determine his very own separate learning trajectory.

Social capital and compensatory education

Critical to understanding the dichotomy between the learning outcomes of the brothers in this study, is identifying how the macro social relations of educational policy, interconnected with meso institutions such as the family and school, to influence the men’s decision making at the micro level. A historical watershed, affecting the education of participants in this study, was the return in 1972 of Federal Labor following the party’s twenty years in opposition. One educational policy that particularly impacted on the lives of most of the baby-boomer men in this research was a decision by the new Whitlam Labor Government to assume financial responsibility for the tertiary education sector. An aspect of this policy was the abolition of tertiary fees which was in part an attempt to amend the long-standing class-bias that existed in tertiary education (Weston, 1985). Implicit in compensatory education policies, such as those introduced by the Whitlam Government, is a deficit model of social capital that is consistent with a conservative approach to families and social change (Baron, 2003; Portes, 1998). The aim of this model according to Portes is to address the perceived inadequacies of the less privileged in

society by providing them access to resources that can assist their social mobility and economic advancement.

For students to benefit from policies, such as those introduced by the Whitlam Government, the education process must be collaborative and involve parents, students and teachers alike. Billy's ability to take advantage of the social capital that became available through the Government's compensatory policies was facilitated by social networks both within and outside school. *When Billy left school he started a traineeship as a production engineer at TAFE. He'd been working for about two months when he received a belated offer of a NSW Teachers' Education Scholarship. He decided to accept the offer after being encouraged to do so by not only his former sixth class teacher but also by his last high school English master who had urged Billy to go to university if the chance arose* (Billy: Sydney, 2008). Billy's access to tertiary studies in teaching reflected the then trend of working-class students towards the less prestigious disciplines (Weston, 1985). All the same, the college of advanced education teaching course was for Billy a pathway to future non-teaching orientated university studies.

Ox, on the other hand, as a consequence of peer networks and the contentious relationships he had with certain individuals at school, failed to gain any advantage from opportunities that were provided by the same Government policies. *Ox found on a great many occasions when the teacher didn't know best and this is where he had problems at school. He became very confrontational with teachers because he used to see what some of them were like. Ox knew that some teachers were "fucking arseholes" and he hated them he "fucking hated them" and he let them know that he "fucking hated them." That's why he got into trouble a lot. Ox recalled that teachers thought that they were better than he was and perceived him to be an "arsehole" and a trouble maker. Ox believed as a student you weren't supposed to say anything. You were supposed to cop on the chin whatever teachers dished out. Students weren't allowed to voice an opinion because their opinion didn't count or matter for anything. Regardless of what the student thought or what he felt it was never going to be right because there was always someone above you who was going to say that you're wrong; the teacher's right so therefore don't voice your opinion don't say anything because you're not authorized, you haven't got the qualifications to ask these questions, you just sit there you listen and you be taught the way you were meant to be taught and don't dare venture off of the line because this is the way it's meant to be. Ox didn't like that* (Ox: Sydney, 2008).

A combination of factors, rather than social class alone, made it difficult for Ox to accumulate the necessary social capital for educational success. His attitude toward teachers varied although his decisions regarding school were affected more by the individuals he did not like. The incident that resulted in his expulsion from school conveys the anger and sense of injustice he felt at the time. Despite the negative consequences, on Ox's schooling outcomes however, the incident shows that he did not always see teachers in a negative light.

After an altercation with a teacher known as Mickey Mouse, Ox had to confront the Deputy Headmaster, for whom Ox had a high regard. The teacher Mickey Mouse had just confiscated Ox's footy card during a formal examination. *"You fucking cunt," Ox said, "You're nothing but a piece of shit and after fucking school I'm going to see you and I'm going to kick the fuck out of you because you're nothing but a fucking arsehole."* When Ox said that it was obvious that the other people in the auditorium had also heard him say it but he didn't care. *He'd just given up. He thought, "Enough's enough, no more of this shit I'm broken now."* Ox had feelings of remorse when he realized that he must face the Deputy. *The teacher pissed off out of the auditorium and came back with Mr H the Deputy Headmaster. Mr H was the Deputy but*

Ox truly had respect for Mr H because he was a good bloke. Ox felt bad that he had to see Mr H. Even though that other bastard deserved it Ox was concerned that Mr H would probably be disappointed in what he'd done (Ox: Sydney, 2008).

Ox reacted emotionally to Mickey Mouse because he viewed the teacher's actions as not only unreasonable but also unjustified. The teacher's conduct was oppositional to what Ox considered were the norms of social justice. Sayer (2005) suggests that the qualities individuals believe to be good or bad in terms of moral behavior are universal and indifferent to social divisions. Paradoxically both Mickey Mouse and Ox were defending a common moral position rather than distinct cultural or classed points of view. Ox's antipathy for school was not only a consequence of the discord between him and specific teachers but also related to: his family's general disinterest in the benefits of schooling, peer allegiances and, unlike his brother Billy, the lack of a real mentor in his life.

Conclusion

This research while acknowledging the influence of family background on the educational outcomes of adolescents also recognizes the significance of non-familial networks in helping students accumulate and utilize different forms of social capital. The study downplays the effect of structural attributes such as social class in the educational decision making of individuals. Evidence from the data indicates that the socioeconomic status and social positioning of a family are less decisive in shaping the educational outcomes of individuals than the literature suggests.

The study also posits that in order for students to obtain real benefit from the forms of social capital provided by compensatory education policies, educators need to better understand the dynamic relationship that exists among the various social contexts in which individuals interact. The research data indicate that some of the most important experiences on an individual's educational decision making occur at the interpersonal or micro level. When non-familial others take an interest in who a young person is and what he does the effect on his educational outcomes can be positive. According to Israel et al. (2001) determinants such as the role of mentors and students' personal interactions with teachers are generally not considered when it comes to assessing students' access to social capital. This study however shows the importance of both the positive and negative effects of these relationships in students' educational experiences.

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