# Understanding disability with children's social capital — **Source link** ↗

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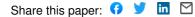**Institutions:** University of Stirling, University of Strathclyde, University of Aberdeen

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# Understanding Disability With

# Children's Social Capital

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**Introduction**

The value of obtaining children and young people's perspectives on disability is increasingly being recognised (Costley, 2000; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000) and whilst it is accepted that this can be challenging (Alderson, 1995; Christensen and James, 2000), researchers have argued that careful engagement with children and young people can lead to important insights which can inform practice (Dockrell et al, 2000; Macnab et al, 2007). This article reports on a specific event which attempted to facilitate discussions with children and young people about diversity issues, including disability. The concept of social capital – the networks, norms and trust that exist between people (Field, 2005; Schuller et al, 2000) – was operationalised and used as both a resource to stimulate discussions, by building on the children's existing connections, and as an explicit goal, through providing opportunities for them to encounter people with different experiences and undermining aspects of adults' power. The paper reports on the processes involved and the topics identified for discussion by the children and young people, then considers what they had to say specifically about disability. Their insights are concerned with knowing disability, relationships and provisions and support and illustrate a shift, through their discussions, from highlighting impairment and incapacity to an articulation of barriers which excluded disabled people – or from a medical to a social model understanding of disability. The paper concludes with some reflections on some of learning about disability that might be provoked by the children and young people's observations and on the implications for practice.

**'Open space': mobilising children's social capital**

*Connections: a conference for children and young people* was the third meeting in an Economic and Social Research Council Seminar Series, *Social Capital Professionalism, and Diversity* (RES-451-25-4012). The other seminars followed a more conventional format and were attended by academics and professionals. The *Connections Conference* was explicitly different and only four of the regular participants in the seminar series, individuals with a particular interest in children's participation, experience in participatory techniques and the authors of this paper, were involved in this. We invited children and young people from three schools to participate in the *Connections Conference.* Students from one primary inner city school had an ethnically diverse population and were aged 10-12. Students in a second primary school, with a socially and economically mixed population, were also aged 10-12. The secondary school had an ethnically diverse population and was located in what would be regarded as a disadvantaged urban area. Students from this school were aged 12-14. In the invitations to the schools, we indicated that the event would focus on diversity and we asked head teachers to have regard for this in their selection of participants. They appeared to have responded to this request and there was evidently a range of abilities, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds among the students who attended. The event was held in the Macrobert Arts Centre, a very 'child friendly' space, within the University of Stirling which a Young Consultants group had been involved in designing.

The concept of social capital, 'social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them and the value of these for achieving mutual goals' (Schuller et al, 2000, p1), has been identified as having significant potential for reducing disadvantage, improving

educational outcomes and enhancing health and wellbeing (Cohen et al, 1997; Uslaner and Dekker, 2001). In education, it could have a role in reducing failure by forging a greater commitment to the other: 'relationships matter' (Field, 2005, p2) and there is an obvious implication that better recognition of, and responsiveness to, the other could lead to a more effective response to diversity. There is a difficulty, however, with operationalising social capital and with finding valid proxy measures for aspects such as truth and reciprocity, while Schuller et al (2000) suggest that even the concept itself is under-theorised. Nevertheless, it is an attractive construct which offers a framework for thinking about the various connections between people and the values – or ties – that bind them. It is possible to distinguish different types of social capital and their effects. Bonding social capital is evident in the connections between individuals with similar characteristics and has value in the promotion of solidarity between people sharing values. Bonding social capital may be seen, for example, within families, school classes and ethnic groups. Bridging social capital occurs when people from different groups come together and may emerge in associations between people of different ethnicities, or between disabled and non-disabled groups (Anthias, 2007). Linking social capital, arguably the most profitable kind (Woolcock, 1998), is established when individuals who have different amounts of power connect and could be seen in, for example, representations by disabled people in Parliament or student led initiatives such as the campaign by the Glasgow Girls to highlight the treatment of failed asylum seekers. Linking social capital can be particularly valuable in releasing potential in individuals through affording them access to power, however many researchers have emphasised the importance of acquiring multiple weak ties of different kinds, rather than a few strong ties (Granvotter, 1973; Szreter, 2000). Furthermore, Woolcott (1998) maintains that effective (and useful) social capital is a

balance between embeddedness and autonomy, that is on the one hand being part of a community, and on the other hand being sufficiently independent from it.

Social capital has been identified as having a significant role in relation to diversity. Lauglo (2000), for example, argues that social capital can help to explain how immigrant youth adapt to school and acquiring social capital can possibly help alleviate disadvantage rather than to reinforce it. This compensatory aspect of social capital in education has also been highlighted by Coleman (1988), while several researchers have attested to the significance of developing extensive weak ties across ethnically diverse groups - bridging social capital - in reducing conflict and promoting democracy (Blomkvist, 2001; Granovetter, 1973; Varshney, 2001). As Pavey (2006) notes, social capital theory has not, thus far, taken account of disability but some researchers have established links between social capital and disability (De Silva, 2007; Potts, 2005).

The social capital of children and young people has often been overlooked in the concern for the exchanges between adults and the effects of these, but Morrow (1999, p757) reminds us that children are 'social actors who influence their own environments' and generate their own networks within school, some of which are more positive than others (McGonigal et al, 2007; Field, 2005). McGonigal et al identified a series of 'capitals' operating within schools at any given time. These include 'club capital', operating at physical, intellectual and emotional levels and involving the various extra-curricular activities; envisioned capital, through the imaginary work children do, for example in role play learning exercises; virtual capital, including those sanctioned by the school such as the world wide web, and

those which are not, such as mobile phones; working capital, through work experience and part-time jobs; and the 'alternative' or 'black economy capital' of subcultures. Some of these multiple capitals may not be discernible by teachers and, as a consequence, may be all the more powerful as resources for the children and young people.

The *Connections Conference* was an attempt to use the students' existing bonding social capital as a resource to generate dialogue. It also attempted to build bridging social capital, by creating opportunities for new connections with people who were 'different' from them, and to develop linking social capital, by undermining the power and status, as teachers and adults, of the four individuals leading the event and encouraging the children and young people into the role of -'experts' on diversity. We introduced ourselves with first names and the short presentation which set the scene for the day was lighthearted and contained sporting and popular culture images relating to diversity issues which sought to 'connect' with the children. The event took place the day after a controversial event had occurred during a popular TV programme, *Big Brother,* in which house guests are gradually voted out by the audience to leave one winner. One participant had allegedly made racist remarks about one of the fellow guests, leading to her 'eviction' and to much coverage on national news and this was mentioned in the introduction. An initial activity posed specific questions, stimulated by picture images, and invited the children and young people to consider who 'gets left out in school and out of school'.   They were also asked  to comment on the messages contained in campaigns tackling racism - *Show racism the red card*, endorsed by footballing celebrities - and disablism - the 2007 campaign of Enable Scotland (http://www.enable.org.uk/).   This latter campaign

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provocatively asked such questions as 'If I ate out of a dog bowl would you like me more?' suggesting that support for disability charities compared unfavourably with that for animal welfare charities. The children were asked to travel around in cross-school groups, discussing whatever came up and writing their thoughts on flipcharts.

**How can we be more welcoming to others?**

The main part of the event used Open Space Technology (http://www.openspaceworld.org/), an approach developed by US businessman Harrison Owen, which, as its name suggests, provides a space for the participants to determine their own agenda for discussion. It has been described as 'passion with responsibility' and as 'chaos and creativity' and is simultaneously loose, because the agenda is not set, and highly structured, using the responses of the participants to determine activities and outcomes. We posed a single question to the children and young people: 'How can we be more welcoming to others' and invited them to respond in whatever way they saw fit, by writing comments on 'post-it's, which they stuck on the wall. We grouped their responses around eight themes.   These themes - Racism; How we might get on better; Disability; Sectarianism; Sexism; Respect; Bullying and What happens outside school - arose entirely from the children and young people.

Discussion groups were established for each of the themes and the children and young people could choose to go any of these.   The norms set were that they were free to leave a group and move on if they wished. The groups were located throughout the building and two rounds of discussions were held; each of the discussions were tape-recorded, and one student in each group was given responsibility for ensuring the

safety and return of the group's recorder. The intention was not to structure these discussions, and to leave the children and young people to take the topic in the direction of their choosing. However, we were insufficiently clear about this to the teachers who accompanied the children and some of them were helpful to the point of steering the conversations and reinscribing the power relations which we had attempted to undermine. One teacher, for example, directed questions at the children and young people and insisted on turn-taking. Another teacher took no part in the discussions, but made her presence felt when she seemed to think the children and young people had become too noisy. In spite of the adult interventions, the children and young people impressed us with their insights and their grasp of these complex dimensions of diversity. They also utilised their existing social capital and demonstrated a considerable capacity to extend this, by forging new connections and engaging with these others in ways which was respectful and responsive to diversity, for example, asking questions of each other and responding to comments made.

**Connecting with disability**

The discussions on disability, and the comments from the children and young people from which disability emerged as a theme, reflected three main areas: knowing disability, relationships and appropriate provision and practical support. We discuss these below.

*Knowing disability*

The children and young people spoke with astonishing candour about disabled people whom they had encountered both in and out of school. At the outset of the

discussions, there was a disconcerting focus on disabled people's lack of capacity or loss of function, describing individuals, for example, who 'can't walk', or 'can't remember things'. Disabled people were generalised as 'they' and 'them'. A discourse of pity was also suggested in respect of individuals with mental incapacities for whom 'it was a shame' and in a discussion of one severely disabled youngster who was described as 'inspiring because she's had to go through her whole life like that.' It is possible that the person using the 'inspiring' moniker was genuinely in admiration, but disabled individuals have expressed some reluctance to be seen in this heroic light (Shapiro, 1993). This emphasis on incapacity, regardless of how it was intended, gave way to a distinguishing of different attributes:

*'Just because you're disabled doesn't mean your brain doesn't work.'*

*'Being disabled doesn't mean they can't do something. For all we know they could do something better than us.'*

*'They could find things a little bit more difficult than us or they could find things more easy than us.'*

The emphasis on the incapacity of disabled people was also replaced by an acknowledgement that disabled people's difference was less significant and perhaps even positive, as this discussion illustrates:

*'It's just cos they're in a wheelchair.*
*They just find things a bit more difficult.*

*Disabled can be good or bad when you think about it.'*

The positive vein continued with the dispelling of a number of a number of myths about what disabled people could not do and the children and young people affirmed this, for example, that disabled people could indeed participate in swimming and could undertake skydiving with assistance. Whilst the discussion of skydiving had a somewhat surreal quality, the children and young people appeared to be thinking through the possibilities in a pragmatic way, identifying potential barriers and speculating on possible ways of removing them.

### Relationships

Disabled people had been identified by the children and young people as among those who 'got left out' at school in the initial set of questions. In the discussions, they elaborated briefly on their exclusion, wondering why people made fun of those 'who can't help who they are and why people think it's funny.' Another young person acknowledged that difference produced a negative response: 'Sometimes we treat them differently because they look slightly different because they have a wheelchair and we don't.' The young people's greater concern, however, was the way in which teachers were excessively 'protective' of disabled students. They considered this to be inappropriate and something which disabled students did not like:

> *'They get a bit annoyed if you're really protective over them. They're like 'Okay! It's not only with disabled people that happens, it happens with other people. But it happens with people in wheelchairs.'*

They argued that it was important not to stand in the way of disabled people's desire for independence:

> *'Don't be too sympathetic, like don't help out with absolutely everything all the time.*
>
> *Because they want to be independent.*
>
> *Just act like they're normal.*
>
> *But they are normal.*
>
> *Yes.'*

The children and young people criticised a playground assistant for being over-protective towards one disabled child, by telling them to 'be careful' if they went too close in the playground. Their view was this caution limited the opportunities of disabled students to participate in playground life and to engage with others. One group of students described a fine line which could be approached and at which difference could be playful:

> *'We have this friend who's really tall because he's got something with his backbones but we can have a joke about that because he doesn't mind if we have a little joke, like 'we can always look up to you'. You can have little, totey wee jokes but not making fun of them wise.'*

We do not, of course, have the perspective of the person who was the object of this playfulness, but those describing it seemed to suggest a strengthened bond had resulted from the encounter. Disabled writer Tom Shakespeare (1999) has suggested

that laughing about disability, when disabled people contribute to it, can have an important role in developing the shared identity of a sub-culture, but there is, of course, a danger of such laughter evoking tragedy or heroic registers and disturbing any bonds which have been made (Stronach and Allan, 1999).

*Provision and support*

For these children and young people, the segregration of disabled students was an absolute non-starter. They argued that disabled people needed to learn social skills and if they went to a 'disabled school', they would only learn from other disabled children. In one part of the discussion, the children likened the notion of segregation to Apartheid and referred to events in South Africa and the United States:

> *'That's like saying to coloured people they have to go to a different school. They used to though. But that was in the olden days. When black and white people couldn't go in the same bus. They had to stand at different bus stops. Black people had to go to the back of the bus and white people had to sit at the front.'*

The children and young people also saw themselves as benefiting from the inclusion of disabled students in mainstream schools: 'It also means that people begin to understand disabled people,' and this is a view found in previous research (Allan, 1999; Thomas et al, 1998). The students spoke approvingly of the various 'gadgets' available to disabled people in mainstream schools, such as a writing wedge for

students with dyspraxia and a kind of playdough used by one student to relax his muscles and expressed approval at these: 'because then everybody gets a fair chance going to the school normally.'

The presence of a disabled teacher in one school was welcomed, but the students expressed their concern for his safety following a fire drill. He had been seen at the refuge area as they descended the stairs, but had still been there when they had returned. Their proposed solution to this problem was locating him on the ground floor, but this was problematic because he was a peripatetic support teacher. In a return to the surreal, they suggested inventing some kind of chute; this was ruled out on the grounds of practicality, although not without some amusement at their own creativity.

The students were critical about the lack of opportunities for their disabled peers to participate in sport and suggested that there should be wheelchair basketball and other sports: 'just to give people in wheelchairs more options.'

Toilets are often an issue of concern for children and young people (Vernon et al, 2003) and these youngsters were no exception. After recommending that there should be disabled toilets in all schools, they suggested that the provision of disabled toilets could actually be a form of exclusion.  Several girls argued that disabled people might feel left out because they can't go to toilets with other 'regular people,' as one put it. An interesting gender difference in understanding was negotiated when one boy asked why anyone would want to go to the toilet with others but the girls patiently replied

that this 'is what you do'. This seemed to make sense to one boy who commented: 'If someone sees you going to a different thing, they think you're different.'

**Regarding others?**

The children and young people conveyed a high regard for disabled students and a desire to connect with them and learn from them. Certain features of educational provision could, they argued, stand in the way of their participation in school life and the building of relationships. The initial consideration of disabled people in terms of their 'negative ontology' (Baker, 2002) may have been something which the children and young people needed to experience and get over with and was quickly replaced by a more sophisticated othering of themselves and a pathologising of the school spaces as disabling. This shift from a medical to a social model understanding of disability is not something which all professionals find themselves able to do (Allan, 2008; Oliver, 1996). Furthermore, the children and young people expressed a commitment to try to resolve some of the barriers facing disabled people; even their more apparently bizarre suggestions, such as the chute for a disabled teacher, did, at least, demonstrate their capacity to envision new possibilities for participation and indicated their understanding of structural discrimination.

The students' comments after the event showed that they valued the opportunities they had been offered to connect with different people and hear perspectives which were different from their own:

*'The groups were split up well so you could meet everyone from the other schools. It was also brilliant when we talked about different things such as sectarianism and sexism (which I was in), as you could hear everyone's views.'*

*'I really enjoyed myself and I learned a lot of new things. I met lots of new people. And I learned there is a different opinion to everything.'*

*'I really enjoyed talking to other children and finding out about their views … I have learned that it is important to listen to other peoples' views.'*

The youngsters experienced these new encounters as surprising, providing new insights for them and new learning. They described their learning about diversity through the process:

*'I learned that everyone is equal and that nobody is perfect.'*

*'I learned that everyone is equal and it doesn't matter what race or religion they are.'*

These comments may come across as a rehearsal of clichés, but this may be more of a reflection of the lack of a vocabulary with which the young people could talk about diversity. Certainly the youngsters were witnessed, by us and by their teachers, connecting with different points of view. The teachers reported their sense of respect for the children and young people's capacity to both listen and influence others' understanding. The individual making the second of these comments also expressed

surprise and pleasure at his own contribution to one of the discussions, saying: 'I was really amazing at that one.'

The event appears to have maximised the children and young people's existing bonding social capital and to have built both bridging social capital, by creating connections with different people, and linking social capital, by undermining our own power and giving the children and young people permission to advise the adults on aspects of diversity. We realised we should have been clearer with the teachers about our expectations that they should relinquish some of their power to enable the children and young people to make choices, and wondered about whether they should have been present at all. However, on balance, it seemed more important that they were able to hear and see their students connecting with disability and with other aspects of diversity. Some of the teachers were planning follow up activities in the classrooms and intended to try out the Open Space approach.

**Connecting better?**

We communicated to the children and young people that their insights had indeed been 'amazing' and that they will have an important role in influencing policy and practice. We had aimed to develop from this data a set of *diversity indicators*. These were not intended as behavioural statements of how teachers should manage diversity in their classrooms but were meant as more general suggestions about how teachers might connect with, and respond appropriately to, diversity. However, our concern about an association with the school improvement genre and with raising inappropriate expectations about what was being asked of teachers led us instead to frame a series of questions which invite teachers to consider how they connect with

diversity and how they might help children and young people make and sustain these connections. These questions will be developed from the data from each of the eight topics of discussion, but those which follow have been drawn from the disability discussions which have been the focus of this paper. They are concerned with knowing, relationships and provision and support, the issues raised by the children and young people.

**Knowing**

*In thinking about individuals' needs, can their capabilities also be considered?*

*Can positive images of disabled people be actively promoted?*

These questions imply a shift from deficit ways of knowing disabled children and young people – and specifically their problems – towards a scrutiny of the teacher's own knowledge and the effects of that on participation. It requires making connections with the disabled children and young people which enable them to reveal information about their interests and desires, rather than their needs, and could be an important source of linking social capital for both teachers and students.

**Relationships**

*Can disabled and non-disabled children and young people be encouraged to get to know each other?*

*Can time be found within lessons to discuss disability and other kinds of diversity with children and young people?*

*Can the 'over-protecting' of disabled students be avoided?*

These questions recognise the value of social capital among children and young people and the importance of allowing this to develop within the formal school spaces. They also acknowledge the interest that children and young people have in diversity and their need to try out some ideas in order to reach a more sophisticated understanding. Disabled children and young people could offer 'expert' advice on particular issues and whilst care would be needed to avoid highlighting difference unnecessarily, such exchanges might enable the children and young people to develop linking social capital.

**Provision and support**

*Are there ways of ensuring provision and support maximises opportunities for participation by individual disabled children?*

*Can provision and support and facilitate relationships between disabled and non-disabled children?*

Here, the enjoinder is for teachers to have regard for social capital – potential and actual – as a crucial component of provision and support rather than as an added extra. These questions invite them to ensure that what they or the classroom assistants do in class to support disabled children at least does not interrupt the connections they already have with their mainstream peers and at best works to actively promote them.

One possible limitation of these questions is that they remain teacher centred, rather than focusing on altered relationships between children and young people. Whilst recognising this limitation, we would contend that there is much to do before reciprocal relationships between adults and children and young people are a regular feature within schools. The first step towards this is a radical repositioning, by teachers, in relation to disability and other aspects of diversity. The findings from this event point to the significant contribution children and young people can make to this repositioning by alerting teachers to the ways in which they might enhance their understanding of diversity and respond more effectively to it.

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