

**Project title:**

LOCALITY, SCHOOL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Project staff:

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Project aims:

To examine the way that children's social networks are sustained through schooling and their contribution to local social capital in different types of communities.

Project methods:

The research was carried out in five contrasting locations: two inner London boroughs, an outer London suburb, a New Town in the South East and a city in the Midlands.

We have followed a number of children [and their parent(s)] from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds through the move to secondary school.

The study was conducted with two cohorts of children between 2003-2005 using a mixed-method approach:

Quantitative

- Surveys with children in the final year of primary school (588) ~ with a bias towards good quality primary schools in poor neighbourhoods.
- Follow-up surveys with a sub-sample of children in the first two years of secondary school (81).

Qualitative

- Interviews with 76 parents ~ about the admissions process and school choice.
- Follow-up focus groups with children in year seven (12 groups, 75 participants).
- Friendship worksheets with focus group participants.
- Follow-up interviews with 20 children in the first two years of secondary school.
- Interviews primary and secondary school teachers (5).

Project findings:**1. Parental social capital and the transition to secondary school**

Key finding: Middle-class and socially mobile parents, as well as educationally ambitious migrants from middle class backgrounds (but currently living in deprived areas), were more likely to be able to utilize their social capital to find and gain places at 'good' schools outside their immediate vicinity.

- The majority of parents did not feel they had any real choice over secondary school admission and families found the process of gaining a place at a secondary school very stressful.

- For some parents the key issue was the kind of children they thought their children would be mixing with; they sometimes selected more distant schools in an effort to influence the child's future social milieu.
- Many parents felt they lacked relevant up-to-date information. The multiplicity of criteria used by different schools was highly complex. With little support from primary schools and virtually no other support agencies, it was parents' networks that counted in the competition for school places.
- Middle-class and socially mobile parents have more of the kind of resources that allow them to locate 'good' schools outside the immediate vicinity. They were able to employ tutors and move house, and utilise social capital.
- This also applied to some educationally ambitious migrants from middle class and minority ethnic backgrounds living in deprived areas. They often actively networked with work colleagues and church members to gain places at the 'right' schools.
- Many networks focused around the primary school playground and could be exclusive and divisive.
- Some more 'isolated' minority ethnic parents, those for whom English is a second language, lone parents and mothers employed full-time, were least able to access the 'right' (often more instrumental) networks.
- As a result 'working class' minority ethnic children tended to be restricted to less prestigious secondary schools than their peers from the same, or similar, local primary school.
- But the impact of social networks and class on the 'attainment distance travelled' between primary and secondary schools for white children in our sample was complex.
- Father's attributes would seem to be reflected more in the quality of the *primary school* than that of the secondary school, even though class background affected the child's own Key Stage 2 results.
- Lone parenthood affected the quality of the *primary school* the child attended in particular. Having an absent father did not, however, reduce the attainment level/quality of the child's secondary school significantly.

2. Children's social capital and the transition to secondary school

Key finding: Contrary to dominant writings on social capital, children draw on and contribute to the social capital of their families and neighbourhoods.

- Children are often instrumental in developing their parents' networks. Several parents commented that they had not known anyone in the locality prior to having children. Parents meet other parents through their children's friends and many children maintain ties with such friends into teenage years.
- Moving to secondary school, however, marks a distinct shift in this as parents seldom have the same level of contact with secondary schools and friends first made at secondary school.
- Older siblings and cousins constitute social capital for children entering secondary school, especially in providing 'back-up' if being bullied or picked on. They often provide access to networks of older children and allow new students to broaden their social networks within the school.
- Families appeared to be more careful and worried about the school a first child went to. Many parents also stated that they could not face the stress of looking for schools a second time. Selection criteria that put emphasis on siblings going to the same school might also explain that relationship. Or it may be that parents came to realise that the attainment score of a school was not the only important criteria.
- Children going to schools without friends were more likely to have professional or managerial fathers and less likely to have relatives at the school. In many cases these children were going to highly selective, high ranking schools some distance away.
- But amongst the children (14%) who knew no-one already at the school or going to the school were newcomers to the area and other isolated children who found themselves in poorly rated schools that others were able to avoid.
- Few children had friends of a different gender. Where they did, this was more often a close friend outside school, both at primary and secondary school.

3. Maintaining friendships across the transition

Key finding: *Children's social networks are important resources which enable them to cope with the transition.*

- In all, about 35% of secondary school children nominated as a close friend someone who had been at primary school with them. Many primary school friendships tailed off, with children using their primary school contacts as social capital to help them to weather the transition to new patterns of friendship. Even so, in year 8, 30% of friendships were with children who had been at primary school with them, and 10% were with primary school friends who had not moved on to secondary school with them.
- This did not mean that children necessarily 'stuck with' their closest primary school friends through the transition. Friendships were fairly fluid amongst the primary cohort, partly dictated by school policies of dividing children between classes.
- Children who moved either with a stable base of bonds or with the confidence to make new friends were often able to expand their networks through a process of snowballing.
- Children who moved alone to a school neither they nor their parents had selected were more likely to struggle with their friendships during years 7 and 8, and often longed for past relationships.
- Family contact remained important. Where children maintained friendship with their primary school friends on entering a *different* secondary school, they had been friends for longer and these friends were more often part of a wider parental social network.
- Children were more likely to hold on to earlier friendships with those going to a different secondary school when both sets of parents knew one another. This was particularly important for those allocated a school that neither they nor their parents wanted.
- There were class and ethnic differences in the links between family social capital, local networks and children's friendship networks. Early on in secondary school children's friendship networks were family-based but not especially locally-based for children going to more sought-after and selective schools; they were more locally and hence family-based for white children going to local secondary schools; but were school-based, separate from family and community for minority ethnic children.

4. Ethnicity and children's friendships

Key finding: *The make-up and friendship networks of primary school classes have an impact on inter-cultural friendship and understanding into the early secondary years.*

- The chances of a child bridging ethnic and religious divides in making friends depended on the opportunity of doing so in school and in the locality. White children outside deprived areas were particularly unlikely to have any friends of a different ethnicity.
- Children who went to Catholic primary schools were more likely to be in ethnically homogenous classes, compared with other children living in the immediate locality, but that this was not the case for those at CoE primary schools in the areas we studied.
- Primary school children in particular had difficulty recognising and reporting inter-ethnicity in friendships. They rarely referred to it as an aspect of sameness or difference, though recognition was greater at secondary school.
- There was no evidence that inter-ethnic friendships were structured around common interests, though sport and especially football prowess did facilitate some of these friendships. Common religion was not an especially important basis for inter-ethnic friendships.
- Inter-ethnic friendships between African-Caribbean and African children were not common, even where they were in the same school class, but where the opportunity was there South Asian children made friends across different groups.
- Asian children's friendships were more school-based than those of other groups, partly because home visiting, even within Asian communities, was rarer than for other groups. Less than half the Muslim children (49%) said that their parents knew those of their friends compared with 74% of non-Muslims.
- In certain circumstances children from other, mixed and non-Western European white backgrounds appeared to be the catalysts for mixed friendship groups.

- Many children identified friends outside school as one of their four closest friends, but few children appeared to look for same ethnicity friends outside their class when the opportunity for same-ethnicity friendship was restricted within their class.
- At secondary school children felt they had more opportunities to mix and make friends across ethnic, but not gender, divides.
- Children from minority ethnic backgrounds who had been at primary school in predominantly white schools and white classes were far more likely to have white friends at secondary school than those who came from schools with few white children. In part this was an effect of geography; but if we compare minority ethnic children from different primary schools who go to the same secondary school, the effect is still evident.
- The exceptions were the small number of minority ethnic children who went to more academic schools some distance away. Although they had fewer opportunities for making friends with minority ethnic children, they tended to do so more than other children. These were the children who appeared more than any other group to seek out same ethnicity (at least in the sense of non-white) friends, for whatever reason.
- Some white children who had been in mixed ethnicity primary classes shifted towards more ethnically homogenous friendship groups at secondary level, but this was not the general pattern.
- Children with more than one minority ethnic friend came from even more ethnically diverse primary classes. But on average white children whose secondary school friends were exclusively white came from primary classes that were 80% white, while those with at least one secondary friend of a different ethnic background came from a primary class in which only 66% of the children were white; a difference that was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This set of white children were distinctly different. None of them felt that Muslim or Asian children were especially 'picked on' in their local neighbourhood