THE PRINCIPALS' ROLE IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR THE PROMOTION OF HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

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 Abstract

School leaders' individual and collective efforts are essential in the promotion of healthy school environments. In this respect, the building of social capital is very important for a school's improvement. The aim of this paper was to determine the role principals played in developing social capital to enhance healthy school environments. The study was conducted in two districts, one in the Gauteng and the other in the Free State provinces of South Africa. It was undertaken as a qualitative research study that involved seven participants. Data collection strategies employed included narratives, individual interviews and field notes. The study was considered important in its application of the social capital theory to determine the role of principals in soliciting economic resources for their schools. From the findings, the main challenge that was common in all the participating schools was the lack of resources for the Promotion of Healthy School Environments. It was found that some principals were able to identify and approach companies that could assist their schools but were then unable to build trusting relationships. In view of the findings, this research recommends training to equip principals with skills to enable them to mobilise resources by taking advantage of social capital in their communities.

Key words: school leadership, economic capital, township schools, instrumental capital

JEL Classification: 120

1. INTRODUCTION

The Promotion of Healthy School Environments (PHSE) is increasingly becoming a priority in schools due to the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s global school health initiative. Since the launch of this school improvement initiative in 1995,

there has been considerable scholarly interest in the topic of health promoting schools (HPS). (Deschnes, Martin & Hill, 2003). Research on the PHSE has significantly expanded the understanding of what HPS entails and of the host of benefits that may result from effective enhancement of such environments for the school and its community. (Langford, Bonell, Jones, Pouliou, Murphy, Waters, Komro, Gibbs, Magnus & Campbell, 2014). The recognition of how these effects are attained (Jamal, Fletcher, Harden, Wells, Thomas & Bonell, 2013) and the importance of collaboration between schools and external communities for successful implementation of programmes is also increasing. However, very little is known about the roles of school principals in soliciting and building the social capital that would benefit the promotion of healthy school environments (PHSE). Understanding these roles becomes all the more important now that the Department of Education in South Africa has started responding through policy formulation to the WHO's call for HPS and keeping up with global trends in advancing strategies that sustain healthy environments. In fact the developed policies guiding the PHSE emphasise the importance of strengthening social capital as a key strategic impulse to mobilise the human and material resources needed for the success of such projects in schools. (SA, 2012, SA, 1996). To that effect therefore, it can only become imperative to gain deeper understanding of the roles of principals in building the social capital required for the PHSE considering their strategic leadership positions in the schools.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While the determinants of the PHSE such as the availability of policies, development of health programmes that focus on learners and school personnel and the physical environment are in principle the same in and for all schools in South Africa, the levels of implementation differ from school to school. This difference could potentially be due to the ability (or lack thereof) of principals to solicit social capital and to build it to an acceptable level that will ensure sustainability in the PHSE. As earlier alluded, research is clear on the importance of healthy school environments. However, there continues to be mediocre leadership that keeps schools from reaching their full potential (Meija, 2016:6) in advancing the kind of partnerships and collaborations that benefit the schools' endeavours of promoting school settings that are conducive for learning. It could be argued that unless principals understood the role they have to play in promoting strong social capital, the concept of HSE will never be realised in South African schools.

Research on school and community collaborations points to a lack of understanding of the role of principals in strengthening partnerships for the purposes of building social capital. For instance, the findings of research conducted by Nel, Engelbrecht, Nel and Tlale (2013) on the South African teachers' views on collaboration within an inclusive education system indicated that teachers believed that they were not adequately trained or skilled to play an equal role in collaborative partnerships. Meanwhile, a similar study conducted by Clelland, Cushman and Hawkins (2013) on the challenges of parental involvement within a health-promoting school framework in New Zealand discovered that although there was agreement on the importance of school-community partnerships, there was a lack of consensus on whose role it was to continuously inform the community about the activities of the school; another aspect of social capital building.

The PHSE is founded on a socio-environmental approach which recognises the collaborations and partnerships with parents and the wider community (WHO, 1999) as well as the use of a combination of integrated actions to support strategies (Jackson, Perkins, Khandor, Cordwell, Hamann & Buasai, 2007:79) that are developed to implement the policies and programmes. The PHSE focuses on several components of the whole school environment including the school food environment (provision of nutrition), physical environment (surroundings, landscape, buildings and facilities for sport and recreation), learning environment (classrooms and teachers, learner support material) and the social environment (relationships between the school and community members) and the involvement of staff members, learners and community members in the implementation of policies and programmes. The multiplicity of interventions and programmes is in itself problematic for schools whose modus operandi is teaching.

Most studies in education tend to look inside organisations to examine the relationship among individual members or groups. Research in business strategy in contrast has focused on external relations between the organisation and its stakeholders. Following this latter approach, this research examines the principals' role in developing the external social capital for the PHSE. In the light of the foregoing discussion therefore, the question that came to mind was: what roles do and could principals play in building social capital with external communities in order to solicit resources for PHSE?

3. CONCEPTUAL-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are two distinct conceptions of social capital. (Miyamoto, Iwakuma & Nakayama, 2014:6). Social capital in the social cohesion school of thought (Putnam's theory) is generally defined as the relationships, norms and trust acquired in meaningful networks (Putnam, 1993) that enable people to work collectively (Woolcock, 2001), and facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. (Dekker & Uslaner, 2001). Ziersch (2005) conceptualises social capital as the social infrastructure, such as networks and values that facilitate the exchange of social resources between individuals and the sum of resources available to those individuals through this infrastructure. According to this school of thought, social capital is regarded as a contextual effect on individuals, conceptualised as the resources available to members of a social group. (Adler & Kwon, 2002). According to Putnam (2000), the importance of social connectedness is more prominent in the context of health and wellbeing (at individual level) than in other domains. The same could be said about the PHSE. In contrast, network analysts such as Bourdieu define social capital as the resources embedded within individuals' networks that people could access through those networks. (Miyamoto et al. 2014:6). Both these schools of thought are fundamental for a positive outcome in the PHSE.

Three types of social capital are mentioned in literature: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding social capital refers to relationships among members of a network who are similar in some form. (Putman, 2000). Bridging social capital refers to relationships among people that are dissimilar in a demonstrable fashion, such as age, education etc. (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Linking social capital is the extent to which individuals build relationships with institutions and other individuals who have relative power over them to provide access to resources. (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004).

The challenge of building heterophilous bridging and linking social capital is amplified when the homophilous community is economically and racially segregated. (Beaudouin, 2007). The majority of schools in South Africa are located in poor communities that lack basic necessities. The policy on the South African Standards for Principalship (Department of Basic Education, 2016) is clear on the responsibility of the principal to build collaborative with the external school community, as can be noted, there is repeated reference to elements of leadership, identification and solicitation of social capital in one of the new standards: Standard 5.1.8. This standard includes such leadership functions as:

'drawing on the richness and diversity of the school's wider community; establishing and maintaining means of open communication between home and school; and building and maintaining effective, collaborative relationships and partnerships with other agencies and potential resource providers in the community". (Department of Basic Education, 2016:19). In this research I contend that the constructs such as building trust and effective communication are indicative of the centrally important role that principals play in building social capital for improvement of schools.

In order to create a collaborative environment between schools and external stakeholders the principal must have deep knowledge and skills about the PHSE and initiation to realise it. According to Scribner and Murtadha (2011), knowing what needs to be done and doing it requires a vision, resourcefulness, creativity and some humility. One of the major roles of principals is to ensure a buy-in of the community, parents and internal stakeholders so as to have a social structure that will develop and implement health programmes and policies. The principal, as a strategic leader is required to, in collaboration with the School Governing Body and stakeholders, create and develop a vision and mission that will capture the imagination of the community. (Department of Basic Education, 2016). Continuous engagement and communication of the vision becomes central in the establishment of a community connection and shared identity.

Another important role is that of building trust, which is key in lobbying for social capital, a function that is supported by the South African Standard for Principals. (Department of Basic Education, 2016). When people trust and respect each other, a powerful social resource is available for supporting collaboration and social dialogue. (Balyer, Karatas & Alci, 2015). Trust is the complex quality (Onyx & Bullen, 2000) and a vital element in successful school community collaborations. (Sui-Chu, 2007). Trust is however only relevant when parties are dependent on each other. Schools and communities are interdependent and with interdependency comes vulnerability. (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). In such a situation the principal can then extend trust by demonstrating some degree of vulnerability to communities and portray such behaviours as "benevolence, honesty, openness, competence, and reliability that potentially foster trust" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015) among schools and school communities. When a high level of trust prevails, a sense of collective efficacy tends to be evident as well. (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Based on Abel (2008)'s division of social capital into three forms: economic, intellectual and cultural, illustrates different types of resources that schools can solicit to enhance their environments. For instance in economic capital the internal stakeholders responsible for health policies and programmes can benefit from the resources resulting in effective implementation of strategies. The HPS model in itself is resource-based, demanding all types of resources to deal with threats to the health of school community members, which schools in poor communities cannot provide.

An empirical investigation was therefore undertaken on the basis of the conceptual-theoretical framework outlined above. The aim of the empirical research was to apply the social capital theory to the schools' initiatives in the PHSE and to determine the role of principals in building social capital to solicit economic resources. The following section contains a report on that investigation.

4. EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

4.1 Research Design and strategy

A qualitative approach was chosen for its suitability to render in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. (Creswell, 1998). The strategy of enquiry took the form of a multiple case study. A study of two cases was done with schools that approached companies on their own to solicit resources and those that were assisted by the Department of Education.

4.2 Population and sampling

The study was conducted in two schools in the Sedibeng districts in the Vaal Triangle and in the Fezile Dabi district of the Free State. The schools were located in poorest areas of the Gauteng and Free State provinces. All schools whose principals participated in this research were classified under Quintiles 1-3; reflecting the poor communities that they were in. All these schools offered a feeding scheme to all their learners, who were also recipients of free school uniforms supplied by the Department of Social Development each year. All the schools were non-fee-paying and relied on the subsidy of the Department of Basic Education for survival.

Principals of four schools participated in this research. The sampling method was purposive as I was looking for schools with larger enrolments of learners where the healthy school environments would be difficult to promote without assistance

from external stakeholders. I was also focusing on schools that were already being assisted or had been assisted by companies.

A snowball sampling method was used to engage participants in the research. One of the principals partaking in the research project: "Promotion of Healthy Physical School Environments" became an informant. This principal suggested another principal who also was heading a big school, with an enrolment of over 1300 with almost half of the learners vulnerable (some double orphans, others had lost at least one parent and others raised by grandparents). When this newly identified principal was approached, two high school and one more primary school principals were further suggested. The recruitment strategy involved principals who were in leadership positions for more than three years, all in public township schools. It was important to involve principals with at least a few years of leadership experience due to the role they played in building social capital for their schools. After employing a total of four principals, one deputy principal and a teacher from two primary and two high schools as part of the study sample, I then decided to approach a district official who was working with these schools to participate in the study as well. Participants in this research thus composed of a high school principal and his deputy principal from school A, a male and a female respectively (coded PA and DPA), principals of primary schools B and C – both females (PB and PC) and a teacher who was a member of a committee that was formed in collaboration with a company (TC), a high school principal (PD) a male from school D and a district official (DO) responsible for schools B and D (n=7).

4.3 Data collection procedures

Three data collection instruments were used in this research, namely narratives, interviews and field notes.

Narratives were the main data collection tool. The principals did narrate their stories starting with their experiences of PHSE and the challenges they were encountering regarding any of the components of PHSE, be it the physical environment, resources or social environment. They would then talk about how they built social capital, their role in accessing and pulling resources to enhance school environments and challenges in building trust with the companies. This data was solicited by means of free recall method as opposed to observation as the events had already happened. Although this could be regarded as a limitation, the participants were requested to talk about the recent events that happened in 2015, a year before the interviews were conducted. Of particular interest in using this approach was the assertion that data gathered by self-reporting could explore the

influence of other personal variables that could not be explored when data was gathered by observation. (Chung, Hossain & Davis, 2005). From these narratives two scenarios emerged: one presented by schools A and C and another by schools B and D. The one for schools A and C is based on a cleaning campaign where schools that were part of a joint project in 2015 decided on cleaning their schools and surrounding areas, ensuring that refuse was collected and filled up into rubbish bins each week for a period of six months (April-September). These schools were to get an amount of R20 000.00 each if they remained in the project and committed to the activity for the stipulated duration of time. The company supplied them with refuse bins to fill up and would collect the garbage every Monday from each school. The driver of the garbage truck was responsible for recording the bins collected from each school. The second scenario was that of schools in Gauteng that were assisted by the district linking them to companies that had agreed to assist.

The individual face-to-face interviews were conducted as a secondary data collection tool. The intention was to get more clarity on the issues that were raised by the participants in their narratives. The interviews lasted for about 1.5 to 2 hours with each participant. In total, 7 interviews were conducted. All interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim after each interview.

Field notes presented in this research were taken during field visits. According to Labaree (2009), field notes can be reflective information in which one records thoughts, ideas, questions and concern as one is conducting observation. Using this definition I described whatever observations struck my mind as the most noteworthy, the most interesting and the most telling. These notes were useful not only for describing environmental factors and the social context (as mentioned in the setting above) but also for identifying issues relevant for further elaboration. The field notes were both methodological and analytical and assisted in the oscillation between data and the analytical frame.

4.4 Data analysis procedures

The analysis of data in this research is based on data that were collected from the ties (*alters*) – the schools and not the nodes. I analysed the narrative data based on three dimensions: temporal, personal and experiential. The temporal pertains to the reflections on the past and present experiences of the collaborations and future impact of the relationships. The personal dimensions relates to successes and

failures, and confusion and clarity, while the experiential was about the self, school, community, companies and the PHSE.

As all the data from the narratives, interviews and field notes was transcribed, thematic analysis was conducted, by first identifying codes from the transcripts of the narrations and field notes.

4.5 Ethical aspects

The Department of Education gave permission for this research to be conducted; the district officials, principals and other participants also gave their consent. Schools and participants in this research are not mentioned by name but assigned codes. The data is presented in a manner that cannot link the information to any particular schools in the two provinces.

4.6 Trustworthiness aspects

Credibility was ensured in this research by the use of triangulation, based on data from narratives, individual interviews and field notes. According to Brewer and Hunter (1989) the use of different methods in concert compensates for their individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits. Checks relating to the accuracy of the data were done after all the data was transcribed and after data analysis. Each participant was given an opportunity to go through the transcripts and comment on the accuracy of the information and that of the analysis.

5. RESULTS

The social networks, as reported in this research tend to be homogenous as they were all companies in the vicinity of schools. In both scenarios there was an indication of macro level social capital that might have been due to the companies' obligation for corporate social responsibility.

Challenges in the PHSE

Participants in schools A and C indicated different challenges that motivated them to seek help from the companies in their community. These problems were mostly related to physical environments including the cleanliness of the surroundings and resources to promote the wellbeing of learners. In fact all participating schools (A, B, C & D) had the challenge of keeping their surroundings clean, as they lacked refuse bins. Keeping the toilets clean was also a struggle. Classrooms were dirty and some had broken windows that had not been replaced timeously. A solution would have been to hire cleaners, of which schools indicated that the bulk of the money allocated to them each year by the department was used for Learner,

Teacher Support Material and consumables. The playgrounds were bare, without grass and with only soccer and netball fields.

Communication and social structure

Schools A and C were situated in the same area, which was surrounded by industries. Support to the schools from these industries was based both on the latter's community engagement strategies and initiatives as well as on being approached for assistance first by the schools on their needs. This can be regarded as a bridging social capital which crosses social divides.

"*we have to approach the companies, they don't assist us if we don't*" (PA); " *we write letters to the companies in January/February, they call us to a meeting in March each year.*"(PC).

Schools would then be invited to send their representatives, who were either teachers or SMT members. Representatives from each school would form a committee made up of teachers and the company representative. Members would determine which needs were similar and needed urgent attention so as to be prioritised. This provided an opportunity for a school to forge ties with other schools thereby developing bridging social capital that will enable them to access other forms of capital or more resources.

"*Representatives of schools are elected at school, the principal has an influence on who is to represent us*" (DPA); "*although we use democratic processes, it is my responsibility to make sure that the teacher selected is capable of representing the school well*" (PC).

The committee members met at least four times a year, about their needs, plans, strategies and achievements and at the end of the project based on clear time frames determined by the company. The committee members conveyed the decisions taken in these meetings to the respective principals of their schools. The principal then had to convert the plan into actions. The participants indicated the following in this regard:

"*it is up to the principal to support us to implement the plan, if he does not prioritise it we do not benefit as a school*" (DPA); '*the principal plays her role in this regard by instructing teachers to be responsible and supervise their learners in carrying out the plan*" (TC).

After the implementation of strategies by schools and provision of assistance by the companies, schools had to write reports that would be submitted to the

companies on dates decided upon by the committee at the beginning of the year. The principals as accounting officers were responsible for its compilation.

Schools B and D (in the same district) mentioned support that they received from the Department of Education in accessing resources from companies in their communities. The district official approached the company and negotiated on behalf of the schools regarding their needs, in that sense he assumed the intermediate brokerage position. The principals' role was then to write proposals and submit them via the district to the company that indicated willingness to assist with the need of the school. After receiving help they had to write reports to the companies that helped them. The two scenarios were different in their approach to companies and yet similar in their focus on formal networks. Schools A and C waited for the district to indicate which companies and industries would help them. This is what the participants said about their experiences on the writing of the proposals:

"*out of 12 schools only five managed to meet the deadline for the submission of proposals at the district*"(PB); "*I needed the money for the playgrounds, but writing a proposal was a problem, I did not know how*"(PD); "*It was an uphill battle (proposals), the least they could do was to take the process further, my role was to link them with companies*" (DO).

The companies responded directly to schools indicating what schools were to be helped with, when and what the role of the schools would be:

"*we were happy with the positive response from the company, we had to come up with operational plans as our plea was for a separate kitchen with a dishing up area for the feeding scheme. My role was to get a qualified builder, get quotations and specifications on the duration of the building project*" (PB); "*As the request was about the fencing of the play area for Grades 0 and R my role was to start procurement processes to get a company for the fencing of the area*"(PD).

By communicating directly with the company, participants indicated being empowered as a result. Although they were confident however, none of the schools contacted the companies on their own in 2016 when the interviews were conducted.

"*It was now easy for me to just pick up a phone and call the company representative who I was sending the correspondence to and ask for clarity, I actually enjoyed being in control. I would do it on my own next time and not wait for the district*" (PB); "*I realised that it is important to have this kind of a*

relationship with companies, I can do this every year when given an opportunity, doing it on my own. Maybe, if it doesn't work out I would wait for the district" (PD); "*although they were reluctant at first they got used to it, the idea was to familiarise them with the process, to enable them to do this on their own*" (DO).

Building trust

As reporting to the companies was one way of building trust between the companies and the schools, all schools lamented the loss of support due to ignorance and not complying with or even understanding the requirements of the companies. Participants acknowledged that building trust was entirely the role of the principal, as they indicated the following:

"*submitting a report was a way of ensuring assistance in future*" (PA); "*We had to acknowledge the company in local newspapers or in our parents meetings and local radio stations*" (PD), "*we failed because of lack of focus, we were grateful, but lacked time*" (PC), "*If representatives have no interest in the task, it is difficult to adhere to the terms of the company*"(PB); "*reporting back to the company is very important, how else can the company trust us with its resources without accountability?*"(DO)

There were consequences for not submitting reports to companies, as shown in the study. In actual fact, for the year 2016 schools A and C indicated being reluctant to approach the same companies for assistance, both schools were in agreement however about the importance of this step:

"*I decided to approach another company in 2016, I could not go back to the same company*" (PA)" "*things get hectic towards the end of the year, I had to choose another company this year*" (PB).

On the reasons why schools could not maintain a strong relationship with the companies that were supplying them with resources, participants indicated the following:

"*The communication between us lessened after the project, maybe I expected the district to thank the company*";(PB) "*I think they understand that we appreciated the help*" (PC).

The solutions to the problems relating to inability to build trust were indicated as follows:

"*It is important to report about each stage of the project, instead of doing so at the end*" (PD); "*Building lasting relationships is important, principals come and*

go the school must always continue serving communities. The vision must go beyond the immediate needs" (PC); "*If there is no clear plan there is no focus, we have to draw up clear plans* (PA).
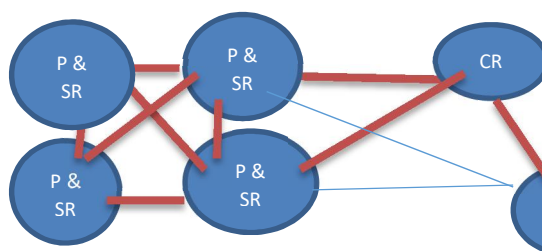
6. DISCUSSION

The first finding is that the social capital in this research emerged from purposive, goal oriented action. The building of social capital was initiated through communicating about the needs of the school. The principals were responsible for identification of the needs of the school and communicating them to companies. In cases where the latter role was delegated the principal had a responsibility to choose the suitable representative. The competence and the level of engagement of the teacher who represents the school provided an opportunity for the building of good relationships with the company and committee members. This relationship becomes crucial in soliciting support for other health programmes that are not part of the collective programme of the companies. This is consistent with the findings from a research by Chia (2011) about the importance of communication in the building of social capital.

The dynamic of the network of relations generate more or less reflexive interaction. Thus, the social capital generated depends on the actors (ties) and the network (nodes). The figure below illustrates the interactions in the two scenarios. In Scenario 1 the principals initiate communication then the school representatives (SR) liaise with the company representative (CR), then meetings are held throughout the year. In Scenario 2, the district official (DO) initiates the building of the social capital for the schools but thereafter the principals (P) would have to take over. In these interactions the ties have an opportunity to use and build social capital. Social capital may be built from the interactions over time. Falk and Kilpatrick (2002) attest to this finding, adding that social capital is dependant on the existence of numbers of meaningful interactions.

Figure 1: Interactions between ties and nodes

Scenario 1: Schools A & C   **Scenario 2: Schools B & D**
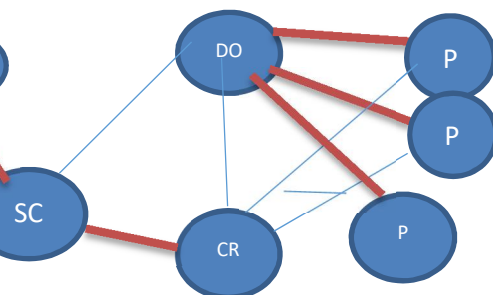
The second finding pertains to the types of capital that were presented in these two scenarios. First, in scenario 1, the bonding capital was not intentional, it happened due to frequent meetings between schools when planning and deliberating on the project. The bond formed through continuous engagements is a resource that schools can use to their advantage: getting emotional support and information. The meetings thus, led to the building of social networks. The school representatives were able to support each other with regards to verification of the processes, though they could not share any other resources as they were in the same disadvantaged communities. This finding is supported by Shen (2010) who indicates that the bonding view of social capital undergirds reciprocity and solidarity and provides substantive emotional support. The social capital in this research was not based on social networks but provided an opportunity for development of such.

The third finding pertains to the role of building trust for the maintenance of strong relationships. This building of trust was entirely dependent on the principal's understanding of its importance. As reported, the principals failed to write reports at the end of the year to the companies. In this kind of partnership there were normative rules that determined the behaviour that was permitted and what constituted a violation of trust. Principals were aware that it would be difficult for them to approach the same company again if they did not adhere to their side of the agreement. These rules were designed to facilitate exchange of resources. The social structure based on school and company ties, represents an assurance that if the school does not respect its obligations, the punishment will be the loss of these ties. What is clear in this finding is the principals' lack of understanding of the importance of building trusting relationships in order to maximise their opportunities of accessing more resources in future. In their actions there were no futuristic projections of the consequences of their actions. Indeed, there is an element of self interested motivation from the companies based on expectations of commensurate returns backed up by the rule of reciprocity. Six, van Zimmeren and Popa (2015:159) posit that the trust phenomenon is at the heart of the social bond. However, this finding refutes Pettit (1995)'s assertion that whenever a trusting request is put in motion, people naturally tend to respond positively.

As considerable effort is required to sustain relationships, principals need to be capacitated and empowered with regards to building of social capital, especially in communication and building trust. Principals have to be able to use all forms of

communication to build trust with the nodes. They need to understand the types of social capital in their communities in order for their schools to benefit from them.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the social capital theory applied in this research helped me in understanding the roles of principals in building social capital for the PHSE. It came out clearly that social capital, which provides opportunities for social support, is a need among schools in poor communities, even if it is instrumental. The understanding of the benefits of building social capital and how to strategically position the school in order to take advantage of the social capital at its disposal for survival is important. The ability to preserve relationships within the social capital matrix thus becomes a lifeline and a stepping-stone to other social networks with prospects for greater supply of resources.

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