

# Enhancing Parent Leadership Through Building Social and Intellectual Capital

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## *Summary*

### **Brief Summary**

*In order to explore how the social capital, and in turn, the intellectual capital, of low-income and diverse parent populations can be enhanced through parent education programs, the authors studied a group of parents who participated in the Parent School Partnership (PSP) program of the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) in two elementary schools in Los Angeles. The authors found that parents' social capital increased through the PSP program's intentional development of trust with parents, their assistance in helping parents understand school system norms for parent participation, and their providing access to channels of information. This, in turn, developed relationships and interactions among parents and MALDEF staff, increasing the community's intellectual capital, and leading to individual and collective actions taken to support children's education.*

### **Full Summary**

Researchers have found that parental involvement in children's education is especially beneficial for low-income and limited-English proficient families, noting that negative effects of social locations can be alleviated by parents engaging in their children's education and effectively communicating with teachers. Yet, these parents are also the ones that are more likely to experience hurdles to such engagement, due to limited access to resources and information, as well as language barriers.

In this study, the authors use notions of social capital to explain why some parents have better access to the resources, information, connections, and tools necessary to engage in their children's education. Using the Parent School Partnership (PSP) program of the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) as a case study, they articulate the need to create mechanisms and programs that support the development of parents' social capital. Additionally, they introduce the concept of intellectual capital to explain how networks of information can be developed to facilitate parental engagement in children's education. According to the authors, social capital influences the creation and development of intellectual capital.

## Social and Intellectual Capital

Working from Lin's (2001) and Coleman's (1988) definitions, the authors define *social capital* as "the resources (power and information) present in a bounded community's social relationships that can be used to leverage additional resources. The resources of both the individual and the community can be used to obtain or maintain additional advantages and by drawing on resources within and beyond the immediate community (p.9)." Additionally, the authors point out that access to this social capital is also linked to the ability to engage in collective action, where parents are not only seeking the best resources for their own children, but for the collective good (which may be their children's classroom, the whole school, or the whole district, for example). The interactions between groups, then, lead to the development and enhancement of *intellectual capital*, or the "knowledge and capabilities of a collective with potential for collaborative social action (p. 11)." The authors build on Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) model of intellectual capital, which states that there are two main mechanisms necessary for the development of new intellectual resources, both the combination and exchange of individuals' knowledge. In the *combination* process, individuals connect and blend information to come up with new points of views and perspectives. The *exchange* process describes the transferring or sharing of information from one party to another, individual or collective.

## Methods

In order to explore how the social capital, and in turn, the intellectual capital, of low-income and diverse parent populations can be enhanced through parent education programs, the authors studied a group of parents who participated in the Parent School Partnership (PSP) program of the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF). MALDEF is a non-profit organization focused on protecting and promoting the civil rights of Hispanic populations in the United States and on empowering the community to actively participate in American society. In order to meet these goals, the organization specifically targets leadership development, educational outreach, and collaboration.

The PSP program operated in four cities—Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and Atlanta. PSP consisted of 12 weekly sessions, 2 hours each, and were led by a Spanish-speaking MALDEF member. The program content “addresses topics such as parents’ rights and responsibilities, the structure and function of the school system, college requirements, financial aid, and leadership and group process skills (p.12).” Parents were also required to engage in a collective action plan that addressed an education concern of their choice; successful program completion included participation in this action plan. For this study, the researchers focused on two elementary schools in Los Angeles and collected data through observations of parent classes, analysis of program documents, and interviews with focus group participants. All PSP participants were of Mexican origin and listed Spanish as their first language.

## Results

### Social Capital Gains

The authors found that an increase in parents’ explicit knowledge about the school system (facilitated by the PSP curriculum), along with opportunities for them to interact with one another, the MALDEF facilitator, and the public officials might improved how well parents used school and community resources to support their children’s education. The authors explain that this communication and relationship-building process can be seen as enhancing parents’ social capital, which is crucial to fostering intellectual capital. Trust, understanding norms and sanctions, and access to channel information are all mechanisms associated with the development of social capital.

**Trust:** In order to develop their social capital, parents must trust the social environment they are in, along with its actors. In this study, the authors found two forms of relationships revolving trust: relational trust with instructors and MALDEF and relational trust among participants.

- Relational trust with instructors and MALDEF
  - Parents expressed an appreciation for the PSP instructors and the resources MALDEF connected them with.
  - Parents were thankful that sessions were given in Spanish and concepts were explained in terms they understood.
  - Parents knew they were able to reach out to MALDEF if they had questions regarding their children’s schools and education.
  - PSP facilitators often listened to and counseled parents when they faced discrimination based on race or language differences.
  - Parents saw the MALDEF organization as one that would “defend their rights”.

- Relational trust among participants
  - In meetings, parents shared their struggles raising their children in the US and the troubles they often faced when they attempted to engage in their children's education. The sharing of stories allowed parents to see that they were facing similar barriers.
  - Realizing they faced similar barriers allowed parents to give advice to one another, creating a sense of community among them. Parents began to share personal stories and articles, and began working together, in Spanish, on their action plan.

**Norms and Sanctions:** In order for individuals and groups to access resources more freely, they need to be aware of and understand the formal and informal norms of a given system. In other words, in order to navigate educational systems and support their children's education, parents must be able to understand what is expected of them. To help parents, PSP facilitators discussed with them the norms of the American educational system. Additionally, PSP parent participants were asked to apply their knowledge of these norms in the development of their action plans. The authors found that PSP discussed the following norms with parent participants:

- Norms for interacting with public officials
  - Parents learned explicit strategies for interacting with public officials.
  - PSP facilitators explained the roles of public officials and coached parents in developing questions for these officials. The officials then visited the program.
- Norms for active participation
  - Through PSP, parents became aware of their rights as immigrants and the role they were expected to fulfill. Parents shared that the program helped them understand and defend their rights.
  - Knowing their immigrant rights and their rights as parents encouraged them to feel more confident in speaking up for their children's education.
  - Feeling confident in speaking up encouraged parents' individual action.
- Norms for group participation as an action team
  - Parents stated that being involved in the action projects allowed them to see the power in working together with other parents.

**Information channels:** In order to develop social capital, there needs to be access to the channels of information that influence decision making. The PSP curriculum did this by presenting and discussing the structure and functions of the K-12 education system, the pathway to higher education. They also walked parents through the bureaucracy and chain of command within schools and the school district, providing explicit information about how to acquire reliable information and access officials.

## **Intellectual Capital Gains**

Building from the social capital gains described above, the parents developed their intellectual capital by collectively addressing their school-related concerns. The authors categorize these collective actions as 1) collective program-guided and required action project and 2) self-organized collective actions arising from parents' own initiative. Parents were given examples and models of actions and strategies they could take and then were asked to select their own issues and develop collective action plans for change. One project, for example, focused on how cars were driving too fast on the school's boulevard. Parents collected data regarding this issue and delivered a formal presentation to the school and the police department. Parents reported that after their presentation, corrective actions were taken.

Using the skills and strategies learned and developed through their participation in the PSP action project, parents began to organize in spaces outside PSP mandated ones. These self-initiated actions occurred during the program and after. For example, the authors found that in three different school communities where PSP classes had previously been offered, parents established their own organizations and continued their organizing and activism in these: Parent Center Cuenta Conmigo (a school-based parent center), APPLE/ Pasadena Unified School District (a district-level parent group), and Padres Activos del Valle de San Fernando (district-based parent group).

## **Conclusion**

In their study of MALDEF's PSP program, the authors found that participating in the program motivated parents to both individually and collectively engage in their children's education. These actions, they argue, led to growth in the community's social and intellectual capital—this growth encouraged parents to move from individual involvement to purposeful collective action. Evidence of the power of this collective action is seen in the development of relationships and the establishment of ongoing parent organizations. PSP created the infrastructure for these relationships to flourish by developing trust with parents, helping them understand school system norms for parent participation, and access to channels of information. All this enhanced parents' social capital.

Yet, as the authors state, “The ability to jointly identify shared problems in the community and to share information about their current status and the process of developing solutions — and taking collective steps to achieve those solutions — fall outside the realm of social capital (p.30).” The authors argue that the relationships and information sharing between MALDEF staff and PSP parent participants led to an “incremental and, in some case, a radical blend of previously unconnected information (p.30).” They call this intellectual capital, which ultimately led to collective action and transformation of education spaces. The PSP program fostered the development of social

and intellectual capital, which increased parents' ability to have an impact in their children's education, which, in turn, is an essential element of parent empowerment.

## **Citation**

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Summary written by Stephany Cuevas.