Building a village: Tapping into untapped resources

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: The term "it takes a village" has been used over the past couple of decades to encourage the use of social capital to raise children into successful adults. All too often we have not used the same tactics to support our youth with disabilities to reach the same levels of successful transition into adulthood.

OBJECTIVE: We will explore what it means to access Social Capital and the importance of using these connections to break down barriers to employment, community and independent living.

CONCLUSION: Person centered planning processes are critical for identifying and utilizing social capital and for successful transition to employment.

Keywords: Social capital, youth with disabilities, transition, person centered planning

1. Introduction

The phrase "it takes a village" is attributed to a proverb attached to African cultures. Historians, however, have found similar sayings across cultures throughout the world. Numerous Journal articles and books bear the title or phrase. Typically, the phrase refers to the impact of the participatory role of community members in raising healthy and successful children into adulthood. Here we will explore the "village" concept as it relates to the benefits and development of social capital.

The concept of social connectedness dates back to Alexis de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America" and the idea of social capital was first coined in 1916 by L.J. Hanifan. For our purposes, we will use the definition put forth in the "Social Capital Building Toolkit" v. 1.2; "Social Capital focuses on the social networks that exist between us (literally who knows whom) and the character of those networks, the strength of the ties, and the extent to which those networks foster trust and reciprocity" (Sandler & Lowney, 2006). Expanding on the value of accessing social capital, Gotto et al. (2010) suggests that social capital is a "set of relationships and social ties, with organizations and to individuals, that can expand one's choice – making opportunities, increase one's options, and lead to a more enriched quality of life.

Over the last 15–20 years, social scientists have embraced the concept of social capital and a body of research has emerged. The concept and research, matured now to a field of study, has recently begun to shift to more specific applications (Kwon & Adler, 2014). Professionals in the disability related fields of special education and vocational rehabilitation are also recognizing the value of social capital utilization in transition and employment for students and adults with disabilities (Trainor, 2008 and Condeluci & Fromknecht, 2014). It is with these concepts and definitions that we focus on how best to support individuals with disabilities, particularly transition aged youth, to utilize their personal "village" and to tap into this resource to increase employment, leisure and independent living outcomes.

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Al Condeluci (2014) defines three levels of Social Capital:

1. Covenant relationships; those relationships made up of those closest to us.
2. Friendship relationships; those relationships made up of those on whom we rely in complex situations.
3. Casual relationships; those whom we see regularly but rarely exchange more than pleasantries.

Multiple studies over many years have looked at the relationship between social capital, health, and happiness. It is clear that increased social capital equals decreased sick and reported sad days (Condeluci, 2014). The Center for Disease Control website on social capital states "circumstances that prevent or limit the availability of social capital for a community and its members can have a negative effect on the health and well-being of the members of that community." ("Social Capital", 2013). Robert Putnam (2000) purports that social isolation is responsible for as many deaths a year as is attributed to smoking. Acquisition and development of social capital, therefore, is particularly relevant in the successful inclusion of individuals with disabilities in community integrated supported employment, recreation, and living. By utilizing a "village" one is able to access and leverage social capital.

Al Condeluci (2014) asserts that social capital plays a role in three key life success outcomes; jobs and meaningful things to do, housing and living choices, and transportation to engage in community. Jobs, housing and transportation are top areas of support when looking at human service systems supporting individuals with disabilities. Research consistently shows that contacts (social networks) matter for finding jobs ("Jobvite Recruiter Nation Survey 2015", 2015). Articles from Forbes, CNN, and Fox news to online recruiting blogs indicate that as many as 80% of jobs are landed through social networking. Additionally, individuals with a disability are more likely to be self-employed than those with no disability (BLS.gov, 2016). In the last decade, self-employment has become more popular as an employment option for individuals with a disability, particularly for those with more significant support needs who are often left out of the traditional labor market (Griffin Hammis Associates, 2016). Accumulation of social capital helps small businesses grow through word of mouth. It also offers opportunities to connect with community and for the interchange of

ideas and commerce for mutual benefits. Capitalizing on social capital is a free or inexpensive way for individuals with disabilities develop mentors, ideas, and support to develop and operate a business (Griffin, 2014).

Part of building social capital is developing trust. Trust can be defined as "thick" trust or "thin" trust. Thick trust is defined as known connections and include family, neighbors, and friends with whom one has a long standing relationship. Thin trust is referrals to people outside one's immediate network. Thin trust relationships are often developed through introductions to someone within the social network of someone in our immediate network (referrals). Some research in the field indicates that connections within those secondary networks, often known as "weak ties", matter the most (Granovetter, 1973). Because we are loosely connected to the social networks of our friends and family, referrals to other's circles expand opportunities exponentially.

One way to develop connections is through others in our networks. Another way is through becoming socially involved and exposed in community spaces which align to the interests of the individual. For example, this could mean taking a yoga class, joining a bowling league, volunteering, becoming involved in a religious organization, taking walks and meeting neighbors, or frequenting a local coffee shop or other business where people congregate. Connections and social capital are often built through participation in leisure and recreation activities. By repeatedly being in the same place around the same people who share interests, we develop familiarity. When working with transition aged students, it is important to consider recreation as part of the IEP goals. Both peer related activities and community engagement activities will help develop social capital.

As part of the transition or discovery process explorations of how to develop these connections should be looked at very closely. Person Centered Planning's (PCP) purpose is to develop collaborative supports focused on community presence, community participation, positive relationships, respect, and competence (Claes, Hove, Vandevelde, Loon, & Schalock, 2010). PCP, which includes a team of people considered "thick" ties, naturally helps to identify areas of interest and should include a plan to become involved. The Person Centered Planning process should, ideally, examine all areas and goals for a person's life including employment, independent living, and leisure. During the process the individual's team, or "village", helps to identify and expand

upon the social networks and social capital which will help the student achieve the identified goals. When supporting individuals with disabilities, we will often need to utilize our own social capital. It is important for professionals to have a 30 second elevator speech which presumes competence in our students and clients and directly addresses how someone might be helpful. People we know may be able to connect us to others who may be employers, able to suggest volunteering opportunities, or have other useful connections and ideas.

With all of this in mind, we know that it is important to help transition age students, moving towards graduation and employment, build and utilize social networks. These networks should include who they know and the social capital of who and what those people can bring to the table. By utilizing person centered planning processes, which will help to identify available social capital, students can be more successfully employed before leaving school as well as more connected to resources in their "village" to support them in meaningful involvement in their community.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

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