

# Nothing New Under the Sun

*A Century of Thought  
About Out-of-School Time and Social Capital*

by Jerry Stein

The words “positive out-of-school time” (POST) may be new but the philosophical and developmental ideas behind them are not. From fighting inequality to providing social capital, the history of POST shows how youth work is essential to school reform and community revitalization movements.

## In the Beginning . . .

The importance of integrating the impact of out-of-school time with school activities and school life has been understood since the dawn of our modern school system. Speaking to the National Educational Association annual meeting in Minneapolis almost 100 years ago, John Dewey, in a speech called *The School as a Social Center*, laid out the basic formula for what we now call a community or beacon school. The school was to fully support and be in tune with numerous nonacademic activities taking place throughout the day. He said, “The work is hardly begun there (the school), and unless it is largely to go for naught, the community must find methods of supplementing it and carrying it further outside the regular school channels” (Dewey, 1902).

Dewey’s vision was similar to ours today. He argued that communities should support activities such as recreation, theater, citizenship, sports, music, drawing, and remedial education because “social, economic, and intellectual conditions are changing at a rate undreamed of

in past history.” The school needed to be “in contact at all points with the flow of community life.” He concluded, “The community owes to each one of its members the fullest opportunity for development . . . this is no longer viewed as a matter of charity, but as a matter of justice—nay even of something higher and better than justice—a necessary phase of developing and growing life.”

This vision was particularly ambitious at a time when only 1 in 10 youth even went to high school and, in large parts of the country, the schools were legally segregated. Creating a school system to which most young people had access was the best outcome that could be managed. In fact, it wasn’t until the passage of *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 that the stage was finally set for serious reconsideration. It was in the decades after *Brown* that it became terribly clear that schools, as they were constituted, were failing many of our children, particularly African-American and poorer children. Something else was urgently needed.

## The Coleman Report and Social Capital

In 1966, twelve years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, sociologist James Coleman led a major federal study called *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. Known ever afterward as “the Coleman report,” the study concluded that schools were relatively powerless in changing children’s academic outcomes. Coleman focused instead on the influence of family, socioeconomic status, and composition of the student body as major indicators of student achievement. The Coleman report was the spur that awoke the nation to the fact that schools on their own would have little impact on significant national inequities.

The major policy impact of the Coleman report was school integration by busing. Any policy implications that might have applied outside the school walls were generally ignored. Coleman himself, however, kept developing the wider implications of his study. In 1972 he chaired another national advisory committee, which issued a report called *Youth: Transition to Adulthood*. Among the conclusions in that report was the statement that “the essential difficulty of schools in handling activities other than academic learning is the position of the child or youth within the school. He is dependent . . . to reorganize a school in such a way that young persons have responsibility and authority appears extremely difficult, because such reorganization is incompatible with the basic custodial function of the school.”

Coleman went on to argue “. . . there are organizations outside the school that have been able, with apparent ease, to devise activities involving . . . responsibility, decision-making, and rewarded work.” He then picked up where Dewey left off, “. . . we feel that the benefits of incorporating non-cognitive activities into schools are far fewer than those from organiz-

ing them outside school.” The report cites Scouting, Junior Achievement, 4-H, Outward Bound, and Neighborhood Youth Corps as positive examples.

Over the next decade Coleman continued to mine this territory. He took an important step when he used the term “social capital” to describe the kinds of relationships provided by families and communities that led to school success. “Just as physical capital is created by changes in materials to form tools that facilitate production, (and) human capital is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways. . . . Social capital comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action . . . (which include) obligations and expectations which depend on trustworthiness of the social environment, information flow capability of the social structure, and norms accompanied by sanctions.”

Activities outside of school, while important, were no longer in and of themselves the crux of the issue. Coleman had now expanded and redefined what was happening outside of school to include social structures and networks that facilitate the development of social capital. As he argued, “both social capital in the family and social capital in the community play roles in the creation of human capital in the rising generation.” In other words, school success depended on social capital.

## The Ecology of Education

During this same time period, but in the field of history rather than sociology, Lawrence Cremin, professor at (and later president of) Columbia Teachers College, was also grappling

“ . . . Social capital comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action . . . ”

—James Coleman

with how to define what happened outside schools and its relationship to what was happening within them.

Cremin began with Dewey's insight regarding the rapid nature of change and its impact on society and learning. As Cremin described it: "two simultaneous developments dominated the American educational scene . . . (in the past century) . . . the first was the steady expansion of schooling . . . the second was the revolution outside the schools." Cremin was not trying to denigrate the importance of the schools; rather, his intent was "to give proper weight to all the other educating forces in American society: the family and the community; student peer groups; television and the mass media; the armed forces; corporate training programs; libraries, museums, churches, boy scout troops, 4-H clubs. . . ."

**"There is obviously an inescapable relationship between the concept of the configuration of education and the concept of the community."**

—Lawrence Cremin

To give nonschool learning its due, Cremin pushed schooling from the center of the theory of American education. He argued, "Remaining within the broad Deweyan context, we can posit a new formulation: the theory of education is the theory of the relation of various educative interactions and institutions to one another and to the society at large." Cremin called this the "Ecology of Education."

In Cremin's hands, what happened outside of school was now a full and equal partner with what happened inside it. As Cremin applied his ideas to numerous individuals in various times and places, he noted what he called "configurations of learning," i.e., tendencies of institutions of education to relate to one another in particu-

lar historical patterns. These configurations are similar to Coleman's notion of underlying social networks and community structures. As Cremin concluded, "There is obviously an inescapable relationship between the concept of the configuration of education and the concept of the community."

### **Community-Based Social Capital and School Performance**

To bring our understanding of out-of-school time as social capital into the 21st century, we turn to the work of Harvard professor, Robert Putnam. Putnam is best known for his essay *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*, in which he studied regional governments in Italy and the underlying interpersonal and interorganizational networks that existed in those same regions. Putnam found that governments worked better in regions with soccer clubs, choral societies, large newspaper readership, and other indicators of what he called "civic engagement." He argued that places rich in civic engagement have a large reservoir of social trust, organized reciprocity, and cooperative norms. Building on Coleman's work, Putnam termed these relationships "social capital" and declared them a precondition for successful adaptation to the modern world.

In his new essay, *Community-Based Social Capital and Educational Performance*, Putnam defines community-based social capital by naming various parts of the underlying social networks in the community. They include youth organizations, religious organizations, civic clubs, volunteer and community projects, socializing, and the incidence of nonprofits and public meetings. He calls each one of these "partial, imperfect indicators of an underlying latent variable—the density of community-based social networks."

After taking into account socioeconomic factors, and putting his measures through some fancy statistics, Putnam concludes that “the most direct and pervasive factor affecting this measure of statewide educational performance is community-based social capital.” Note that he refers to states. Putnam’s work has not yet been applied to local communities. Within the state restriction Putnam is quite eloquent. He argues that: “This evidence suggests that the attitudes and behavior that parents and students bring to the educational process are even more deeply affected by the strength of community and family bonds than by the general socioeconomic or racial character of their communities.” In other words, out-of-school relationships and networks, as we have defined them, more than race or class, “seem to encourage relatively high achievement in both primary and secondary schools.” This is big news.

### Now What?

Where are we in 2002? Awareness of out-of-school time has been thrust upon us by changes in modern living and demands for social equity. Out-of-school time is now seen as a fundamental part of the educational ecology

of our communities, and as an indicator of the underlying structure of our networks and relationships—of our social capital. With Putnam’s help we have strong evidence to suggest that when we positively affect this out-of-school time factor (community social capital), we impact our school outcomes in an important way. To be constructive, those efforts must be part of the community’s foundation, not a superficial program that shines one year but fades away the next, leaving no long-term impact on structures and capacity.

In many ways, Putnam’s research offers something of the Holy Grail of youth-oriented research: the link between school and the community. It should challenge us as youth workers to try to duplicate his efforts at local community levels. It may well be that, as Putnam concludes, “. . . revitalizing American community life may be a prerequisite for revitalizing American education.” So, with a coordinated focus on positive out-of-school time grounded in an understanding of social capital, youth work may be more essential to school reform and community revitalization than any of us ever imagined. ☘

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