



Moving Towards More Socially-Connected Educational Systems: From Theory to Practice

By Maxime Honigmann



ISID

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY
OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
INSTITUT D'ÉTUDE DU
DÉVELOPPEMENT INTERNATIONAL

Research to Practice Policy Briefs
PB-2017-03 | maxime.honigmann@mcgill.ca

Moving Towards More Socially-Connected Educational Systems: From Theory to Practice

Maxime Honigmann
Institute for the Study of International Development
McGill University
Email: maxime.honigmann@mcgill.ca

This paper was prepared in conjunction with the Global Symposium on Overcoming Social Isolation and Deepening Social Connectedness held at McGill University from October 25-27, 2016 and convened by ISID Professor of Practice Kim Samuel.

The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in these papers and works are strictly those of the author(s). They do not necessarily reflect the views of ISID.

ISID takes no responsibility for any errors or omissions in, or for the correctness of, the information contained in papers and articles.

Introduction

Education has long been viewed as a key component in the empowerment of individuals, communities, and nations alike. Study after study has highlighted how improvements in educational systems can lead to lasting development benefits, including decreased poverty, improved gender parities, and all-around better economic opportunities. Schooling can act as a societal equalizer, giving disadvantaged individuals the chance to improve their socioeconomic standing and end up better off than their predecessors. Education promotes self-determination on individual and collective levels, and as such is deeply intertwined with an individual's empowerment, self-respect, and respect for their community (Khisty 2006, 438). Depending on how they are oriented, educational systems may support or subdue the identities of individuals and groups, with the identities of disadvantaged or minority groups particularly at risk of suppression.

If incorrectly or insufficiently addressed by educational policies, the physical and socioeconomic differences of disadvantaged or minority groups can percolate through the educational process in a way that can add to pre-existing disparities. When the performance standards of educational systems do not properly take these differences into account and concentrate resources on higher achieving groups early on, they create otherwise-avoidable learning gaps, which in the long-run contribute to isolating conditions such as higher instances of poverty (Kenny et al. 2002; Peters and Oliver 2009; Botezat 2016). For example, an analysis of household surveys from thirteen countries found that the well-noted link between disability and poverty in adulthood was negated when educational attainment was controlled for (Filmer 2008, 150).

Research has also noted the negative effects of isolation and disability on educational attainment, highlighting the potential for self-reinforcing relationships to develop between school, social isolation, and student disadvantage (Samuel et al. 2014, 16). As this paper will demonstrate, the consequences of this isolation, which include individual-level effects (such as worsened mental and physical health) and societal-level effects (such as weakened social cohesion and strains on the healthcare system), can be costly and, in extreme cases, tragic. In our digital era of increasing social disconnection, policy action must be taken to reorient school

organization and priorities towards a more socially-connected approach, or the debilitating effects of isolation will be widely felt well into the future.

The arguments of this paper are grounded in the “social connectedness” perspective, which considers the “relationships that people have with others and the benefits these relationships can bring to the individual as well as to society” (New Zealand Ministry of Social Development 2010). Though exact needs will differ from country to country, district to district, and school to school, a social connectedness-oriented approach is one that can offer considerable benefits to educational systems of all kinds. This paper aims to provide a general framework through which opportunities for educational improvement can be identified and conceptualized. There exists a wealth of both theory and practical experience that policymakers may draw solutions from to build socially-connected educational schools, a definition for which will be outlined in the following section. Unsurprisingly to scholars specializing in social connectedness-related issues, many of these solutions involve a more prominent role for communities and a more equitable distribution of resources among students, both of which help create a more inclusive, engaging educational experience.

This paper argues that a more equitable and ultimately more productive education system is possible if reforms are made along the lines of a social connectedness-promoting approach. The benefits of more socially-connected, community-oriented educational systems are legion. This paper first provides a brief theoretical framework of social connectedness and the concepts closely related to it, outlining the theories that the subsequent analysis will draw from. Following this, it provides a survey of contemporary social isolation-related shortcomings in the typical modern educational system and outlines evidence drawn from cases of successful social connectedness-increasing case studies in various world regions. The cases discussed are drawn from experiences in Arizona, New Zealand, Finland, Vietnam, and Chicago, in the interests of proposing internationally-relevant conclusions. Finally, a series of policy recommendations are provided to offer a general framework for policymakers to move their educational systems in a more socially-connected direction. These recommendations, adaptable to the unique needs and resources of each individual school district, are general enough to apply to most educational systems across the world.

Conceptual Approach

This paper will analyze the public educational systems of various countries at various geographic and demographic levels, with the aim of producing generalizable recommendations for policymakers worldwide. Public education systems and the schools which they oversee (as the social spaces where students and the state's education system interact) serve as the unit of analysis. A direct theoretical predecessor to this perspective is Robert Putnam's theory of social capital, which similarly contends that "networks and the associated norms of reciprocity have value" (Putnam 2011, 41). In other words, one's inclusion in social networks and engagement in reciprocal interaction with others presents opportunities for that individual which may (and often do) translate into material benefit. Inclusion has a profound role on the psychology and social relations of an individual, legitimizing one's interactions with those around them and entailing a degree of reciprocity (Peters 2003, 26).

With this in mind, Sen's "capability approach to wellbeing" begs us to consider an individual's lack of social access to be just as serious a deprivation as a lack of access to livelihood (Sen 1993). It then follows that the lack of a sufficiently socially-connected life can risk giving rise to "diverse capability failures," where individuals lack both important resources (such as income or quality education) and the opportunities needed to procure these resources (Samuel et al. 2014, 2). This paper thus adopts a multidimensional view of poverty, with relational deprivation being considered a threat to development alongside more material forms of deprivation. In the apt words of Amartya Sen, "we must look at impoverished lives, and not just at depleted wallets" (Sen 2000, 3). A poverty of social connectedness necessarily leads to social isolation, with childhood isolation depriving individuals of the skills and mental wellbeing necessary to success as an adult (Synergos Institute 2014, Botezat 2016, 8). Social isolation can be defined as "the inadequate quality and quantity of social relations with other people at the different levels where human interaction takes place (individual, group, community and the larger social environment)" (Mills et al. 2014, 6).

Notably, social isolation can be experienced not only when a person is physically alone, but also when they feel alone due to a lack of connectedness with the people around them (Synergos Institute 2014). Social isolation can be thought of as the state of mind resulting from social exclusion, with social connectedness resulting from inclusion. Social connectedness may

be fostered in many ways, particularly through policies which build stronger community bonds and lessen feelings of social division. Schools, as spaces where most young people learn social skills and build relationships, offer particularly fertile ground for improving social connectedness among youth and in a community at large. A socially-connected school is one where all students care about and feel a connection towards their school environment, fellow pupils, and wider community, and feel a sense of esteem about their academic achievement (Hall-Lande et al. 2007, 269). In a socially-connected school, students are given the resources they need to have an equitable chance at success early on, are encouraged to help and learn from each other, and share classroom space with students of various backgrounds and abilities.

The following section outlines common barriers to social connectedness in the context of the contemporary education paradigm. Following this, it examines a series of cases from various regions of the world which illustrate the many different ways in which social connectedness may be successfully promoted in educational systems.

Opportunities for Improvement

Education as a universal, non-discriminatory right is enunciated in countless international frameworks and agreements, such as several United Nations declarations including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The justification for working towards educational systems which serve all equitably not only has clear normative human rights-based ramifications, but substantial positive material ramifications as well. As will be shown, strategies which counter isolation in educational systems help equalize opportunities for all groups and, when properly executed, improve student performance, giving governments a better return on their educational investments.

Social Connectedness and Education

It goes without saying that a better funded educational system will have numerous advantages over a less-well funded one, and that funding is often a limiting factor inhibiting certain types of educational reforms, such as increased training for teachers and smaller class sizes. While increased funding certainly plays a major role in improving educational quality,

research shows that policy approaches can have just as much, if not more, of an effect (Bing 2008, 119). In the same vein, considerable research highlights the boons that social connectedness in schools offers to the rest of a nation. Sen, for example, argues that the economic success of East Asian countries can be partially ascribed to their highly universalized, socially-connected systems of “basic education and elemental social opportunities,” highlighting the rapid successes that have been achieved when resources like public schooling and healthcare are expanded in tandem and with high inclusivity (Sen 2000, 31-34). On the individual level, research shows that adolescents who share high quality peer relationships in school have better self-esteem, a lower risk for depression, and lower rates of suicide (Hall-Lande et al. 2007, 280; Special Olympics Media 2011).

Indeed, social isolation and health, both mental and physical, are fundamentally intertwined. Aside from the obvious mental health risks that isolation-driven feelings of loneliness and dejection may bring, the links between social connectedness and physical health are being increasingly revealed by a growing body of medical research. For example, studies examining mortality risk factors have found that social isolation and smoking 15 cigarettes a day produce comparable mortality rates (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010), and have also proposed an association between isolation and the earlier onset of physical disabilities (Lund et al, 2010). Despite a wealth of such evidence, policy-based solutions to social connectedness deficits have not been widely adopted (Mills et al. 2014, 6), presenting a unique opportunity for today’s governments to simultaneously improve public health and education. By investing in socially-connected education systems, policymakers are in effect investing in the mental and physical wellbeing of their populations on both an immediate and long-term basis.

On the individual level, social connectedness is a sense of belonging resulting from inclusion, and it is not difficult to imagine the potential benefits to schools when their students feel more included and engaged. A survey of school principals across dozens of countries found that student truancy was cited as one of main obstacles to learning, according to the OECD’s 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA (OECD 2016). Socially-connected schools actively counter truancy by making students feel more included, respected, and important. According to New Zealand’s Ministry of Social Development, people who feel socially-connected also tend to contribute positively to their communities and society, namely by

taking actions which “accumulate recursively” such as joining volunteer organizations (Williams 2013, 142-143).

A shift towards a socially-connected educational system requires a shift of both the beliefs and practices of the educators, and requires a close relationship with the wider community (Peters and Oliver 2009, 274). Youth community involvement is an effective strategy for preventing aggressive behavior, but more broadly, for helping youths acquire the competencies, confidence, and sense of belonging necessary for a successful transition into young adulthood (Zeldin 2004, 624). Involvement of the local community can have massive implications on the wellbeing of students by reinforcing their shared identity, notably in minority communities where this identity was historically (or is currently) subdued by government policy. As the following section will elaborate, the introduction of local knowledge systems in such schools can decrease racism, increase feelings of belonging and unity, improve educational outcomes, and reinforce the dignity of individuals in a profound manner (Battiste 2002, 22-23).

While social connectedness is a deeply intersectional concept that may be analyzed from countless perspectives, this paper will use the concept to make recommendations in three categories: cultural, socioeconomic and physical. Cultural issues relate to language, history, and cultural practices. Socioeconomic issues include class and race considerations. Physical issues are those which concern both physical and mental disabilities. While the three categories overlap in many ways, a nuanced approach is required to comprehensively address the multidimensional nature of social isolation.

Cultural Isolation

In the contemporary world, educational systems generally follow a monocultural, centrally-directed educational philosophy, where one culture or group’s “interpretive monopoly” comes at the expense of other learning methods (Battiste 2002, 10). The classroom interaction patterns of this education style are based on a less flexible approach towards culture and learning, inhibiting teachers from creating learning contexts where a child’s culture is present, and producing assumptions of cultural homogeneity (Bishop et al. 2009, 8). This approach has dire isolating consequences for minority and indigenous peoples. Members of communities which lack “cultural continuity,” a concept which refers to the integrity of linkages between culture, health, and education, tend to experience markedly higher suicide and dropout rates

(Hallett et al. 2007, 393-394). This is tragically unsurprising; when community and identity are at odds with the educational system, social isolation and a lack of engagement are to be expected among the student body. It is crucial to note that the inclusion of community knowledge in educational systems does not necessarily detract from or dilute from more established educational practices. Traditional and indigenous educational approaches, for example, have the potential to offer a pedagogical complement to monocultural systems through their generally well-developed applied learning techniques, and can motivate students who feel disengaged by more theoretical schooling models (Barnhardt 2005, 10-11).

Similar conclusions can be drawn about linguistic gaps in the educational system. Western schooling typically takes place in the dominant language of the former colonizer, disallowing the languages of local communities from thriving in the educational setting. The result is a “language shift” which sees younger generations gradually lose the ability to speak their mother tongue fluently as they are assimilated by the educational system. The loss of any community’s heritage language reflects the fundamental weakening of the cultural links that produce social connectivity, and is experienced concretely “in the concomitant destruction of intimacy, family and community” (McCarty 2003, 148). The western system tends to place paramount emphasis on spelling, grammar, and literal comprehension, and ultimately treats writing as a mechanistic, culturally-disassociated tool to be benchmarked by a standardized “high-stakes testing” accountability regime (Battiste 2002, 19-20, McCarty 2003, 159). The alternative “constructivist approach” to reading and writing, which stresses interpretive methods based on personal experience and prior knowledge, offers interesting solutions to both the cultural and linguistic shortcomings of a monocultural, monolingual education.

This approach can have profoundly positive effects on literacy, a capability which is in itself “not abstract but embedded in social contexts,” motivating a stronger sense of purpose and of connection to one’s community within the literate individual (Battiste 2002, 20). A particularly representative example of the bilingual, bicultural approach is the immersive program pioneered by educators of the Navajo nation near Rock Point, Arizona. This Navajo community had witnessed a steady decline in Navajo language fluency, visibly reflecting the “language shift phenomenon”. Indeed, one 1991 survey of Navajo pre-schoolers revealed that about half were English mono-linguals (McCarty 2003, 155). In response to this, educators and

community leaders worked together to create an educational immersion program that placed a heavy emphasis on co-operative learning, with program leaders ensuring that an adult caretaker from the community spent some time speaking Navajo with each child every day after school (McCarty 2003, 155-156). The approach followed a “four-fold empowerment” strategy, with the school board, staff, community members, and students all taking a responsible and productive role in the process. The results of this program showed that they were able to learn the language of their heritage “without cost,” performing as well or better than students from the demographics who did not complete the immersion program (McCarty 2003, 156). Subsequent standardized test data shows these performative differences in clear numerical terms, establishing the status of the Navajo program as a model of success which may be replicated, though analysis of the data also stresses the crucial role of families and the community in supporting such initiatives (Arviso and Holm 1990, 46-47; McCarty 2003, 156).

The linguistic-educational experience of the Maori people in New Zealand offers similar testament to the advantages of bicultural education. While the Maori language was once “all but” banned in New Zealand after a “long and debilitating history of colonization and marginalization,” it now thrives in the *Kohanga Reo* (“language nests”) and *Kura Kaupapa Maori* (Maori philosophy schools) that have been established by communities since the 1980s (Hornberger 1998, 451). A decade after the establishment of these schools, roughly half of Maori pre-school students were enrolled at a *Kohanga Reo*, a unique success which has been attributed to the school’s community-centric approach and the inclusion of cultural education in addition to language in the curriculum (Hornberger 1998, 451). A study of the Waikato-Tainui tribe’s Maori immersion school in Huntly, New Zealand found that this type of schooling acted as a “springboard” of self-determination and confidence which led to education or vocational achievements (Harrison and Papa 2005, 68). Equally using this “springboard” as a foundation with which the Waikato-Tainui were able to resettle their ancestral land, the educational community became a hub of knowledge which other Maori tribes looking to resettle their lands could draw from. This knowledge-sharing illustrates the large-scale potential that community-driven, identity-strengthening education approaches have for increasing social connectedness beyond the local and individual scopes.

It should be noted that the benefits of bilingual education go beyond indigenous communities. UNESCO recognizes that multilingual education approaches increase feelings of inclusion in students, and notes that positive impacts on student performance are observed when mother tongue instruction is introduced early on (UNESCO 2009). Bilingual education for majority language students is effective in promoting functional proficiency in a second, and even third, language at no cost to the participating students' native language development or academic achievement – even in the case of disadvantaged (or “at-risk”) students (Genesee 2004, 574). Additionally, a growing body of research has found evidence for the benefits of bilingualism in improving the cognitive abilities and basic skills of toddlers (Blom et al. 2014, 106; Crivello et al. 2016, 122). On an economic level, few would deny the instrumental advantages of possessing multilingual abilities, an ever-valuable asset in the age of globalization. UNESCO's “Policy Guidelines for Inclusion Education” stress that a shift towards inclusive, multilingual schools need not be costly: strategies such as peer teaching and multi-ability classrooms can help drive down costs while linguistic accommodation is driven upwards (UNESCO 2009, 11).

Physical Isolation

Physical differences, such as learning disabilities or physical conditions requiring special attention, are commonly used as justifications for separating students into groups that are given less opportunities for academic achievement. Often this separation is carried out on the basis of impersonal, one-size-fits-all schooling policies, as well as a lack of awareness and resources. Standardized testing, a relatively straightforward, policy-friendly method of categorizing and evaluation both school and student performance, is often to blame for this differentiation, though it is increasingly used in modern educational systems. The reliance on high-stakes testing is a product of what has been referred to critically as the “machine bureaucracy” model of education, which allocates the most resources to those who are able to score well in testing early on (Peters and Oliver 2009, 275-275). This approach in effect marginalizes the disadvantaged, who began their educational careers at a clear disadvantage – children with disabilities, racial minorities, and those who have grown up in poverty, for instance – worsening inequalities and achievement gaps as students move through the system (Peters and Oliver 2009, 278). These scores affect the level at which students can pursue subjects later on, their peer groups, and other academic

opportunities, contributing to hierarchical achievement structures which discourage school-wide connectedness.

The inclusive schools framework presents a less isolating alternative for educational systems. With origins in Special Education theory, inclusive education is built around the assumptions that each student possesses the “inalienable right to belong” and that a non-segregated learning environment benefits everyone, not just students labeled as having a differences (Special Olympics Media 2011; Falvey and Givner 2005; UNESCO 2009). This “shared academic environment” requires policies which promote academic, physical, and social inclusion, training staff to respond to pupil diversity in a positive manner, with differences treated as favorable opportunities rather than disadvantages (Special Olympics Media 2011; UNESCO 2009). Though “inclusive” seems to connote an inward-facing demeanor for these schools, the involvement of the wider community in reinforcing the school’s all-embracing support system is paramount. Peters and Oliver attribute the success of an inclusive school to

the efforts of school-community members, including teachers, school administrators, parents, school council members, policy-makers and local business people. In order to create a successful school community, all members of the community must be willing to work together with a common inclusive education vision of education, high expectations, equitable distribution of resources, co-operative learning, strength-based approaches to teaching and learning, culturally responsive teaching, rich curricula and authentic assessments. (2009, 276)

Once these factors are all in place, the authors argue that improved results and cohesion can be expected (Peters and Oliver 2009, 276). In the United States, the Accelerated Schools Project (ASP), which has been introduced across the country on a limited scale since the 1980s, represents the academic success that inclusive school programs can engender. The ASP, which has been pioneered in schools with high proportions of special needs students, reorients school priorities to follow three basic principles: “unity of purpose; empowerment with responsibility; and building on strengths” (Peters and Oliver 2009, 277). Parental and community involvement is regularly encouraged to ensure all students meet or exceed a uniform level of academic achievement by the end of elementary school. In other words, resources are not concentrated on higher-performing groups of students, but rather distributed based on needs to give all students an equitable chance of success in the next step of their education. Evaluations of participating schools have shown the program to increase attendance, student attitudes and parent participation

for the entire student body, with correspondingly positive effects on achievement for students both with and without learning disabilities (Peters and Oliver 2009, 277; Bloom et al. 2001; Villa and Thousand 2005, 46).

Finland has implemented a similar approach across their entire national education system under their “comprehensive education” framework. As of 2008, all Finnish children receive an equivalent level of basic education, including those with “the most severe developmental impairments” (Halinen and Järvinen 2008, 79). Students with moderate disabilities are never separated by ability at the basic level, and instead study in “heterogeneous groups” with great emphasis placed on equitable resource distribution and early interventions for children with learning differences (Halinen and Järvinen 2008, 89; Itoken and Jahnukainen 2007, 19). In line with the inclusive schools framework, education in the general classroom is framed as a right for all capable students (Itoken and Jahnukainen 2007, 9). Notably, standardized, high-stakes testing and the ranking that comes with it are totally avoided as both a measurement tool for students and accountability mechanism for schools (Halinen and Järvinen 2008, 89; Itoken and Jahnukainen 2007, 19). Instead, test results are used to identify student needs on an individual, absolute level, and resources are granted to schools on the basis of these needs. This comprehensive education approach, along with other factors such as high quality teacher training programs, has led to Finland’s education system being recognized as one of the best in the world by most indicators, earning the country the nickname of “the OECD’s model pupil” (Grek et al. 2009, 4). The Finnish comprehensive education case shows how a properly implemented inclusive education approach can fit within an educational policy which meets the highest standards of achievement.

As the conditions for and definition of inclusion will vary from school district to school district, many advantages are offered flexible approach which leverages the resources of the local community and gives it a voice in the process. Community-driven resourcefulness may be particularly advantageous in developing areas, where state resources are more limited. The WHO’s Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) approach for improving special needs education has had particular success in Vietnam, whose education system serves approximately one million disabled children (Peters 2003, 4). The CBR program, which has been widely adopted in the country, links the health sector with the educational system in a way that has

improved special needs education while sustainably maintaining costs comparable to those of pre-CBR systems. Aside from activities directly related to health and education, the Vietnamese CBR program follows a comprehensive approach which includes raising awareness about disability issues and working to better integrate disabled people into the wider community (Mijnarends et al. 2011, 4). These activities are locally led by Community Support Teams which consist of social workers, community leaders, educators, women's and youth unions, and healthcare professional (Peters 2003, 35).

As a transition to an inclusive school approach would require additional staff training, the implementation of new curricula, and greater resources for students overall, the costs of such a transition are regularly cited as a major limiting factor. However, both the academic benefits in terms of student achievement and health benefits of decreased isolation make this approach an investment with dependable, rapid payoffs. Additionally, the inclusive schools framework can do more than just increase connectivity among students and staff within each school. It can also be used to form networks between inclusive schools and non-inclusive schools, potentially introducing greater social connectivity to the latter. A comprehensive report on inclusive education produced for the World Bank's Disability Group highlighted the possibility of turning inclusive schools into resource centers to produce, test, and disseminate best practices (Peters 2003, 22). As resource centers, inclusive schools can help train professionals from other schools, share knowledge, and aid students from surrounding areas on a part-time basis. This also creates opportunities for disabled and disadvantaged students to tap into wider networks by leveraging their experience and expertise with inclusive learning programs.

Socioeconomic Isolation

Socioeconomic dynamics resulting from class differences interplay profoundly with social connectedness factors in educational systems. The main factor behind this dynamic is the isolating effects that academic differentiation in non-inclusive schools can have, resulting in progressive segregation (both between and within schools) that is in many ways structurally driven. As schools are one of the main spaces for socialization and relationship-building in most children's lives, the detrimental and self-reinforcing nature of this isolation are unsurprising. Research has found that children from disadvantaged families tend to enter school with fewer useful academic skills than better-advantaged peers and have been found to lag in cognitive

development as they progress through their education. (Burger 2010, 141). For vulnerable students, this contributes to a cycle of social isolation which plays out as academic disparities become more clearly defined. Research has shown lower academic achievement to be linked to several isolating risk factors for such students, including emotional distress, substance use, and early drop-out rates for vulnerable individuals (Hall-Lande et al. 2007, 269).

As socioeconomically disadvantaged children are funneled into a path dependency of academic underperformance by exclusionary educational systems, their chances for escaping poverty become increasingly slim. Additionally, in an era where science and mathematics competencies have become among the most lucrative and employable, the 2015 PISA study found that socio-economically disadvantaged students were about three times more likely than advantaged students to score below the study's baseline for scientific proficiency (OECD 2016). The relational deprivation that often afflicts those in poverty is known to cause psychological issues such as shame, delinquency, and difficulty in school, all factoring into a feedback loop of socioeconomically-driven isolation for disadvantaged, underperforming students (Kenny et al. 2003, 143, Mills et al. 2014, 4-5). Disadvantaged students in inclusive schools that lack coordinated efforts to increase social connectedness are particularly at risk.

Fortunately, education also holds the key to bridging some of these equity divides, with socioeconomically-targeted programs holding the potential to benefit “the whole system” – the PISA report's data found higher-than-average science scores in countries where more resources are allocated to disadvantaged schools without losses elsewhere (OECD 2016). When budgets are limited, investments in early education can have substantial payoffs. The social connectedness that results from active participation in a preschool program can be particularly beneficial. An international study on the educational experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged students found that preschooling and other early interventions had “considerable” positive effects on their cognitive development, steering children away from a path towards psychologically-motivated isolation (Burger 2010).

However, the data also suggests that early investments are not enough to guarantee an escape from academic and social isolation later on, as later exposure “unfavorable learning conditions in disadvantaged milieus” is found to counter the effects of early educational intervention programs (Burger 2010, 140). This suggests that targeted efforts to increase social

connectedness are necessary at subsequent schooling levels as well, and a shift away from academic segregation offers promising results. Research has found an association between Poland's decision to end its primary school performance tracking program and a significant gain in overall academic achievement scores over a period of just six years (Bing 2008, 119). The 2015 PISA report concluded with similar findings, stating that an avoidance of performance-based sorting of students in early secondary school years leads to smaller disparities in academic resources for disadvantaged students, such as attention from teachers and quality of science instruction later on (OECD 2016).

Beyond a policy of avoiding differentiation, another key factor lies in the establishment of a genuinely inclusive academic culture stressing universally high expectations and celebrating the achievements of students at all levels. This approach, which promotes social connectedness by avoiding hierarchy or inequity and boosting self-esteem and egalitarianism amongst students, has been cited as one of the major factors behind the success of Chicago's high poverty, high achievement "Golden Spike" schools (McGee 2004, 116-117). These schools have been put forth in the United States as models for innovation and inclusion, helping narrow racial and economic achievement gaps despite a relative lack of resources and representing the benefits of social connectedness in rectifying socioeconomically-induced inequities.

The schools did so by leveraging a diverse toolbox of social connectedness-promoting strategies, including afterschool programs, information technology, deep community engagement, regular ceremonies and celebrations, and highly focused intervention initiatives (Institute for Latino Studies 2005). This approach was found to be particularly potent when combined with meaningful community involvement, such as parent education at school, community health access, and other programs which "extend academic learning time by operating beyond the normal school day and beyond the traditional school year (McGee 2004, 118). Unsurprisingly, students in "Golden Spike" schools were found to benefit greatly from early interventions to address child literacy issues (Institute for Latino Studies 2005) – as has been previously argued, targeted early interventions can be extremely effective in preventing later disparities.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the above discussion of theories, issues, and solutions, this paper proposes following policy recommendations to bring educational systems more in line with a socially-connected, community-oriented approach:

- **Conduct a study on the inclusive schools framework and implement it if viable.** A community-oriented, non-segregated schooling experience is critical for early childhood development and later educational performance. Differences should be increasingly looked at and treated as opportunities, high standards should be put in place for everyone, and each student must be guaranteed a fair chance at fulfilling them early on. The inclusive schools approach has immediate benefits by increasing social cohesion and self-esteem of all students within a school. In the longer term, special needs students are just as well-prepared for more advanced schooling as their peers, and in many cases, costs are saved down the line while the overall level of achievement of the school increases.
- **Adopt an approach where additional resources are devoted to underperforming and underprivileged students early on.** All too often, resources, such as teacher attention and access to modern information technology, are concentrated with higher achieving student groups. Allocating resources where they are needed the most helps close privilege and disability gaps, though resource distribution should not be viewed as a zero-sum game in this case: raising support for underachieving students has been shown to benefit the educational system as a whole.
- **End practices of student performance tracking and differentiation in primary school and the early years of secondary school.** As early tracking is inherently colored by structural factors such as those related to socioeconomic status, a student's early disadvantage can steadily progress into being funneling into difficult-to-escape low-achieving brackets. Aside from creating a high-stakes, competitive environment which in itself is not conducive to strong social connectedness, the removal of such tracking has produced positive academic results on large scales.

- **Invest in and subsidize pre-schooling to promote healthy child development and early socialization.** Pre-school, though often non-mandated, can lead to significantly better cognitive development for children, which can counter the effects of socially isolating factors like poverty and disability. While this would require extra resources, the benefits in terms of mental health and socioeconomic development can be profound.
- **Invest in and promote bicultural immersion programs for minority communities.** Bicultural education has been shown to offer many social benefits for minority communities, including increased connectedness within and without the group, increased pride and self-esteem, and improved academic performance. Such programs help re-establish the connectedness-supporting cultural linkages that more isolating educational practices place under threat.
- **Expand bilingual education programs for both minority and majority students.** Bilingual education programs have shown great promise in rekindling declining languages, increasing social connectedness (in schools and in the wider community), and offer many tangible benefits for participating students. Minority language speakers become less isolated, while all students gain marketable skills. In many cases, general academic achievement also increases.
- **Consider adopting a constructivist approach to reading and writing.** Both the process of engaging with literature and the process of writing creatively are inseparable from one's cultural and community identities. This approach can boost literacy rates, increase self-esteem and cultural awareness, and ultimately make each student feel more accepted in the school environment. This approach is especially warranted in the educational systems of communities that have traditionally faced (or currently face) exclusion or discrimination.
- **Fund and design rigorous empirical studies to identify local demographics of social isolation and academic inequity.** Such studies can dispel harmful myths, while allowing decision-makers to more effectively understand and address social isolation-related educational disparities. Gains and falls in educational achievements should be noted with as much nuance as possible, with results disaggregated by key categories such as gender, socioeconomic background, disability, and ethnic group. In the case of

a lack of research capacity, administrators should partner with government agencies, international actors, and the private sector.

Conclusion

There is perhaps no more important battleground against social isolation as schools and the broader educational systems they inhabit. Social isolation can afflict any individual of any background, but individuals who come from poverty, minority groups, and those with disabilities or other special needs are particularly at risk. Education presents an ambiguous opportunity for these individuals: it can act either as a space for connection, support, and equitable learning; or a process which differentiates individuals by ability early on, exacerbating disparities and cementing isolation-inducing social structures. The former approach can help build social connectedness in schools and beyond, improving both health and academic outcomes when properly executed. The latter differentiating approach has many inconspicuous costs, most of which disproportionately affect already disadvantaged groups.

Strengthening educational systems with social connectedness requires an intersectional approach which may only proceed while cultural identity, differences in physical ability, and socioeconomic realities are considered concurrently. This paper has presented a series of generalizable policy approaches which can be used to achieve this goal. However, the exact approach for each educational system will be different, as the unique needs of each school's students and the nature of the surrounding community must be taken into account. This is why an expanded role for community involvement is key: the contributions of community members can help ensure accountability, spearhead tailored and flexible solutions, keep costs sustainable, and ultimately improve and legitimize the education experience for students. Ideally, a social connectedness approach to educational reform should be undertaken in tandem with other interrelated social campaigns such as those related to public health and poverty reduction. Ultimately, the multidimensional nature of poverty and isolation necessitate an equally multidimensional solution. Education, with its ability to substantially raise the social and economic status of groups and individuals from generation to generation, seems to present an appropriately comprehensive answer.

Bibliography

- AFN. "Quality of Life of First Nations." Assembly of First Nations. June 2011.
http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/factsheets/quality_of_life_final_fe.pdf
- Arviso, M., and W. Holm. "Native American Language Immersion Programs: Can There Be Bilingual Education When the Language Is Going." *Journal of Navajo Education* 8, no. 1 (1990): 39-47.
- Barnhardt, R. "Indigenous knowledge systems and Alaska Native ways of knowing." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2005): 8-23.
- Battiste, M. *Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy in First Nations education: A literature review with recommendations*. Ottawa: Apamuwek Institute, 2002.
- Bing, W.K. "Education and inequality in the developing world." In *Inequality in Education*, pp. 86-127. Springer Netherlands, 2008.
- Bishop, R., M. Berryman, T. Cavanagh, and L. Teddy. "Te kotahitanga: Addressing educational disparities facing Māori students in New Zealand." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 25, no. 5 (2009): 734-742.
- Blom, E., A.C. Küntay, M. Messer, J. Verhagen, and P. Leseman. "The benefits of being bilingual: Working memory in bilingual Turkish–Dutch children." *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 128 (2014): 105-119.
- Bloom, H.S., S. Ham, L. Melton, and J. O'Brien. "Evaluating the Accelerated Schools Approach: A Look at Early Implementation and Impacts on Student Achievement in Eight Elementary Schools." Manpower Demonstration Research Group. 2001.
- Botezat, A. "Educational Poverty." Gh. Zane Institute for Economic and Social Research of the Romanian Academy, Iasi Branch. *NESET II ad hoc question* no. 5 (2016): 1-11.
- Burger, K. "How does early childhood care and education affect cognitive development? An international review of the effects of early interventions for children from different social backgrounds." *Early childhood research quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2010): 140-165.
- Crivello, C., O. Kuzyk, M. Rodrigues, M. Friend, P. Zesiger, and D. Poulin-Dubois. "The effects of bilingual growth on toddlers' executive function." *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 141 (2016): 121-132.
- Falvey, M. and C. Givner. "What is an Inclusive School?" In *Creating an Inclusive School*, edited by R.A. Villa and J.S. Thousand, 1-11. Alexandria: ASCD, 2005.
- Filmer, D. "Disability, poverty, and schooling in developing countries: results from 14 household surveys." *The World Bank Economic Review* 22, no. 1 (2008): 141-163.
- Genesee, F. "What do we know about bilingual education for majority language students?" In *Handbook of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism*, pp 547-576. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 2004.

- Grek, S., M. Lawn, B. Lingard, J. Ozga, R. Rinne, C. Segerholm, and H. Simola. "National policy brokering and the construction of the European Education Space in England, Sweden, Finland and Scotland." *Comparative Education* 45, no. 1 (2009): 5-21.
- Halinen, I., and R. Järvinen. "Towards inclusive education: the case of Finland." *Prospects* 38, no. 1 (2008): 77-97.
- Hall-Lande, J.A., M.E. Eisenberg, S.L. Christenson, and D. Neumark-Sztainer. "Social isolation, psychological health, and protective factors in adolescence." *Adolescence* 42, no. 166 (2007): 265-286
- Hallett, D., M.J. Chandler, and C.E. Lalonde. "Aboriginal language knowledge and youth suicide." *Cognitive Development* 22, no. 3 (2007): 392-399.
- Harrison, B. and R. Papa. "The Development of an Indigenous Knowledge Program in a New Zealand Maori-Language Immersion School." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2005): 57-72.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., T.B. Smith, and J.B. Layton. "Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review." *PLoS Med* 7, no. 7 (2010): e1000316.
- Hornberger, N.H. "Language policy, language education, language rights: Indigenous, immigrant, and international perspectives." *Language in Society* 27, no. 04 (1998): 439-458.
- Itkonen, T. and M. Jahnukainen. "An analysis of accountability policies in Finland and the United States." *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* 54, no. 1 (2007): 5-23.
- Institute for Latino Studies. "Measuring the Minority Education Gap in Metropolitan Chicago." Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame (2005).
- Lund, R., C.J. Nilsson, and K. Avlund. "Can the higher risk of disability onset among older people who live alone be alleviated by strong social relations? A longitudinal study of non-disabled men and women." *Age and Ageing* 39, no. 3 (2010): 319-326.
- Kenny, M.E., D.L. Blustein, A. Chaves, J.M. Grossman, and L.A. Gallagher. "The role of perceived barriers and relational support in the educational and vocational lives of urban high school students." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 50, no. 2 (2003): 142.
- Khisty, L.L. "Language and mathematics: Toward social justice for linguistically diverse students." In *Proceedings of the 30th Conference of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education*, vol. 3, pp. 433-440. 2006.
- McCarty, T.L. "Revitalising Indigenous languages in homogenising times." *Comparative education* 39, no. 2 (2003): 147-163.
- McGee, G.W. "Closing the achievement gap: Lessons from Illinois' Golden Spike high-poverty high-performing schools." *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 9, no. 2 (2004): 97-125.

- Mijnarends, D., D. Pham, K. Swaans, W. H. Van Brakel, and P. Wright. "Sustainability criteria for CBR programmes—two case studies of provincial programmes in Vietnam." *Disability, CBR & Inclusive Development* 22, no. 2 (2011): 3-21.
- Mills, C., D. Zavaleta, and K. Samuel. *Shame, humiliation and social isolation: Missing dimensions of poverty and suffering analysis*. Vol. 71. OPHI Working Papers, 2014.
- New Zealand Ministry of Social Development. *The Social Report 2010*. New Zealand. (2010). <http://socialreport.msd.govt.nz/2010/index.html>
- Peters, S.J. "Inclusive education: Achieving education for all by including those with disabilities and special education needs." (2003). The World Bank: Washington.
- Peters, S., and L.A. Oliver. "Achieving quality and equity through inclusive education in an era of high-stakes testing." *Prospects* 39, no. 3 (2009): 265-279.
- Putnam, R. "Social capital: Measurement and consequences." *Canadian Journal of Policy Research* 2, no. 1 (2001): 41-51.
- OECD. "PISA 2015 Results in Focus." *PISA in Focus*, no. 67 (2016). OECD Publishing: Paris.
- Samuel, K., S. Alkire, J. Hammock, C. Mills, and D. Zavaleta. *Social isolation and its relationship to multidimensional poverty*. Working paper No. 080. Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, 2014.
- Sen, A. "Capability and Well-being." In *The Quality of Life*, edited by M. Nussbaum and A. Sen, 9-29. Tokyo: World Institute for Development Economics Research, 1993.
- Sen, A. "Social Exclusion: Concept, Application and Scrutiny." Office of Environment and Social Development, Asian Development Bank, *Social Development Papers* 1 (2000).
- Special Olympics Media. "A Policy Guide for Socially Inclusive Schools." (2011). Special Olympics Project UNIFY: Washington DC.
- Synergos Institute Social Connectedness Programme. "Building Social Connectedness: A Brief Guide for Practitioners Working with Children and Youth." 2014. Johannesburg: Synergos South Africa.
- UNESCO. "Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education." United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. (2009). UNESCO: Paris.
- Villa, R. and J. Thousand. "The Rationales for Creating and Maintaining Inclusive Schools." In *Creating an Inclusive School*, edited by R.A. Villa and J.S. Thousand, 41-56. Alexandria: ASDC, 2005.
- Williams, J. "Social Cohesion and Free Home Internet in New Zealand" in Abdelaal, A., ed. *Social and economic effects of community wireless networks and infrastructures*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global. 2013.
- Zavaleta, D., K. Samuel, and C. Mills. *Social isolation: A conceptual and measurement proposal*. Vol. 67. OPHI Working Papers, 2014.

Zeldin, S. "Preventing youth violence through the promotion of community engagement and membership." *Journal of Community Psychology* 32, no. 5 (2004): 623-641.