Bridging the Gap on Locational Disadvantage: Impact of Community-Identified Interventions on Social Capital, Psychosocial, and Socio-Economic Outcomes

Locational disadvantage is a pervasive problem with long-term socio-economic consequences for youth and communities. Whilst numerous interventions have been aimed at reducing entrenched disadvantage, most have concentrated on the economic or physical characteristics of disadvantaged communities, often overlooking the importance of the social environment and residents’ ‘stocks’ of social capital. This study was unique in that the main focus was determining the importance of social relationships in ameliorating the negative externalities associated with youth living in disadvantaged settings.

Furthermore, within the educational context, an ongoing concern is the increasing size of the academic achievement gap between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged students. In line with the goal of reducing such gaps in locationally disadvantaged schools and communities, the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE) at the Australian Catholic University, in collaboration with The Benevolent Society, investigated longitudinally the impact of social relationships on a wide range of desirable student short- and long-term outcomes. The study also assessed the effectiveness of a suite of school-based, research and community-identified, innovative interventions.

Led by Professor Rhonda Craven of IPPE, this project took place in seven public schools within New South Wales located in communities identified as experiencing long-term disadvantage (based on the Socio-Economic Indexes and Vincent, 2009). The participating schools received innovative interventions which addressed locational disadvantage and fostered social inclusion in communities. The suite of interventions consisted of three stages: (a) Bonding Capital in Year 1, focusing on whole-school approaches to improving peer relations; (b) Linking Capital in Year 2 with an ongoing mentoring program which drew mentors from IPPE, The Benevolent Society, and communities to increase students’ engage-ment and enhance their academic achievement; and (c) Bridging Capital in Year 3, which targeted social health and combated racism. Participants, including students and parents, have been surveyed four times over three years to collect information regarding the effectiveness of the interventions in building social capital and addressing disadvantage.

The study has developed reliable and valid measures for social capital, created knowledge about the roles served by social capital and the processes that under-pin the relations between social capital and social-economic outcomes in disadvantaged communities. The interventions implemented produced different levels of effects on building the social capital and offered significant educational and socio-economic benefits across individuals, schools, and the wider communities.

Project Title: Bridging the Gap on Locational Disadvantage: Impact of Community-Identified Interventions on Social Capital, Psychosocial, and Socio-Economic Outcomes
Start Date: 3 January 2011
End Date: 31 December 2014
Funding Body: Benevolent Society and ARC Linkage Project Grant
Contact: Rhonda.Craven@acu.edu.au