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A Capital Idea

Capital *adj.*: relating to or being assets that add to long-term net worth —*Merriam-Webster dictionary*

CAPITAL RELATES to one's own or a group's worth, particularly concerning assets that can be leveraged to accomplish desired goals. We already know about business and financial capital. We understand that you have to make an investment if you want a return, that if you want growth, you can't just squirrel away your assets but instead you need to put them to work. Capital must circulate if assets are going to grow. And governments are crucial in creating the conditions and the levels of confidence that can stimulate or discourage capital investment. Of course, we're not talking only about financial capital—we're talking about how we invest in people and get returns from those investments too.

People have written about and argued in favor of developing many different kinds of capital. Financial capital is the obvious one. But cultural capital, spiritual capital, "natural" capital, and even "erotic" capital all have their proponents as well. This book is about *professional capital*. It takes the basic and powerful idea of capital and articulates its importance for professional work, professional capacity, and professional effectiveness—particularly in the teaching profession.

TWO KINDS OF CAPITAL

People don't really disagree about the importance of getting and keeping good teachers and good teaching. However, two schools of thought about

different kinds of capital are driving entire nations in diametrically opposite directions on this front.

Business Capital

In the first view, what kinds of teachers we need and how best to get them are driven by ideas about *business capital*. Here, following the collapse of worldwide property and financial markets, the primary purpose of education is to serve as a big new market for investment in technology, curriculum and testing materials, and schools themselves as for-profit enterprises. In the estimates of some multinational moguls, this is a massive \$500 billion market.¹

When education is organized to get quick returns on business investment, and to increase immediate returns by lowering that investment, it favors a teaching force that is young, flexible, temporary, inexpensive to train at the beginning, un-pensioned at the end (except by teachers' own self-investment), and replaceable wherever possible by technology. Finding and keeping good teachers then becomes about seeking out and deploying (but not really developing or investing in) *existing human capital*—hunting for talented individuals, working them hard, and moving them on when they get restless or become spent. This is the human widget image of the profession.

The *business capital* strategy toward teaching is advocated aggressively in the United States and is gaining ground in places like the United Kingdom and several countries in Europe. Yet, as we will see later, none of the most successful school systems around the world go anywhere near this approach in building one of their most valuable societal assets. In Finland, South Korea, and Singapore, teachers are nation builders, top leaders say. They are indispensable national assets.

Professional Capital

A second view—our own—promotes what we call *professional capital*. This strategy has already been adopted by the highest performing economies and educational systems in the world. Countries and communities that invest in *professional capital* recognize that educational spending is a long-term investment in developing human capital from early childhood to adult life, to reap rewards of economic productivity and social cohesion in the next

generation. A big part of this investment is in high-quality teachers and teaching. In this view, getting good teaching for all learners requires teachers to be highly committed, thoroughly prepared, continuously developed, properly paid, well networked with each other to maximize their own improvement, and able to make effective judgments using all their capabilities and experience.

Professional capital is itself made up of three other kinds of capital—human, social, and decisional. A lot has been written about the first kind—*human capital*. Alan Odden’s book on *The Strategic Management of Human Capital in Education* defines human capital as “talent” and describes how to get more of it, develop it, and sustain it.² Strangely, though, as we will show, you can’t get much human capital by just focusing on the capital of individuals. Capital has to be circulated and shared. Groups, teams, and communities are far more powerful than individuals when it comes to developing human capital.

Human capital therefore must be complemented by and even organized in terms of what is called *social capital*. Like human capital, the idea and strategy of social capital, as we will explain later, also has a distinguished history. The important point for now concerns the contributions of human and social capital, respectively. Carrie Leana, a business professor at the University of Pittsburgh, points out the well-known finding that patterns of interaction among teachers and between teachers and administrators that are focused on student learning make a large and measurable difference in student achievement and sustained improvement. She calls this *social capital*, which she contrasts with *individual capital* that is based on the belief in the power of individuals to change the system. By contrast, Leana shows that the group is far more powerful than the individual. You need individuals, of course, but the system won’t change, indeed individuals won’t change in large numbers, unless development becomes a persistent collective enterprise.

Leana has been closely examining the relationship between human and social capital. She and her team followed over 1,000 fourth- and fifth-grade teachers in a representative sample of 130 elementary schools across New York City. The human capital measures included individual teacher qualifications, experience, and ability to teach. Social capital was measured in terms of the frequency and focus of conversations and interactions with peers that centered on instruction, and was based on feelings of trust and closeness between teachers.

Leana also obtained the mathematics scores of the students of these teachers at the beginning of the year and compared them to the gains by year-end. She found that teachers with high social capital increased their students' mathematics scores by 5.7% more than teachers with lower social capital scores. Teachers who were both more able (high human capital), and had stronger ties with their peers (high social capital) prompted the biggest gains in mathematics achievement. She also found that low-ability teachers perform as well as teachers of average ability "if they have strong social capital in their school."³ In short, high social capital and high human capital must be combined.

Because it is necessary to have both high human and high social capital, the question remains: How can we develop both of them? Here is the answer: If you concentrate your efforts on increasing individual talent, you will have a devil of a job producing greater social capital. There is just no mechanism or motivation to bring all that talent together. The reverse is not true. High social capital does generate increased human capital. Individuals get confidence, learning, and feedback from having the right kind of people and the right kinds of interactions and relationships around them.

Consider what happens when a talented individual enters a school low on social capital. Although it is possible to make a difference through heroic effort, eventually the overwhelming likelihood is that the person will leave or burn out in the process. We set out considerable evidence later on to back up this observation. Now consider the reverse: A teacher who is low on human capital and has poor initial confidence or undeveloped skills enters a highly collaborative school. Chances are high that this teacher will be socialized into greater teamwork and receive the assistance, support, ideas, and feedback to help him or her improve. This is dramatically powerful when you stop and think about it. Imagine that you would become a better teacher just by joining the staff of a different and better school.

Everything we say about individual human capital versus collaborative social capital applies not only to teachers but also to schools. A few unusually innovative schools or ones that beat the odds here or there through the brilliance of individual teachers, the charismatic leadership of their principals, and the endless self-sacrifice of everyone may perform far beyond expectations for a few years. But efforts to turn around individual schools by finding the right individual leaders, or by replacing all the bad individual teachers with good ones, or by parachuting in an outside intervention team are doomed to achieve temporary gains at best. The gains almost always

disappear after the intervention teams pull out, once the key leaders leave, or when the overworked and isolated staff finally run out of steam. If we need much more social capital within our schools—colleague to colleague, peer to peer—we need this just as much across and between our schools. Professional capital as human capital plus social capital is therefore a personal thing, a within-school thing, and a whole-system thing. In the end, professional capital must become a system quality and a system commitment if it is to develop school systems further.

There is more. *Professional capital* also has a third essential element. We will unpack this later, but think of professional capital as the product of *human capital*, and *social capital*, and *decisional capital*. Making decisions in complex situations is what professionalism is all about. The pros do this all the time. They come to have competence, judgment, insight, inspiration, and the capacity for improvisation as they strive for exceptional performance. They do this when no one is looking, and they do it through and with their colleagues and the team. They exercise their judgments and decisions with collective responsibility, openness to feedback, and willing transparency. They are not afraid to make mistakes as long as they learn from them. They have pride in their work. They are respected by peers and by the public for knowing what they are doing. They strive to outdo themselves and each other in a spirit of making greater individual and collective contributions.

When the vast majority of teachers come to exemplify the power of professional capital, they become smart and talented, committed and collegial, thoughtful and wise. Their moral purpose is expressed in their relentless, expert-driven pursuit of serving their students and their communities, and in learning, always learning, how to do that better. Those few colleagues who persistently fall short of the mark, even after extensive assistance and support, will eventually not be tolerated by their peers because they let their profession and their students down by not teaching like pros!

THE WRONG STRATEGIES

People can only teach like pros when they want and know how to do so—when they have the right knowledge and background, the colleagues around them who will keep them performing at their peak, and the time and experience that underpin the ability to make wise judgments and decisions that

are at the heart of all professionals' actions. Instead, in the United States, at least, there is large-scale evidence that 40% of K–12 teachers are currently “disheartened” with their job, hardly an expression of dynamic professional capital driving the nation's next generations forward!⁴

... fear, force, and financial short-sightedness won't get you a high-quality teaching profession brimming with human, social, and decisional capital!

The United States and England—neither of them impressive performers on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) highly respected international tests of student achievement, where they languish somewhere between 17th and 31st, depending on the subject being tested—have recently drawn most of their teachers from the lower reaches of the university graduating cohort, not the highest ones (not much *human capital* there); and they pump more and more wasted resources (or short-term *business capital*) into schemes like Teach for America, Teach First, and other kinds of alternate certifications that cram the preparation of teachers into just a few short weeks and see many of their qualified teachers leaving after only a few years in the job.⁵ These schemes sometimes attract outstanding *individuals*, but they will never change the *system*. If you make a low investment, you won't get much of a return. These short-term strategies driven by *business capital* deprive younger teachers of the time to develop the *social capital* of working with long-term professional communities in the school or with the wider communities served by their schools. They are given insufficient opportunities to develop the practice and experience over many years that underpin the *decisional capital* of wise professional judgment.

In response, there's no use producing a study or two showing that the results for alternately certified teachers are no worse than the average for the existing teaching force—because the point is that in the United States and the United Kingdom, this average, coming, as it does, from the lower ranks of university graduation, is already far too low.⁶ And the “capital punishment” approach taken by too many policy makers of bashing the teaching profession, killing off its unions, and blaming public schools in impoverished communities for their outcomes is not going to raise this average either. We need teachers and teaching to be the best and to be drawn from the best—as in the world's highest performing systems—not just cheap enough or good enough to get by! Later on we will show that attracting tal-

ented and committed teachers *and* establishing cultures for them to work in teams must go together. There are no silver bullets here, but there are silver linings if you do both in concert.

Nor will defensive teacher unionism do anything to advance the cause of teaching like a pro unless unions and federations can follow their most avant-garde leaders to share or even lead the responsibility for turning around low-performing schools (as the California Teachers' Association has done), work in partnership with their governments on teacher-driven innovation and inquiry (as is the case with teacher federations in Alberta and Ontario in Canada), or implement creative and courageous processes of peer-driven performance review that raise the standards of the profession (as in more than a dozen jurisdictions in the United States).⁷

Thus, fear, force, and financial short-sightedness won't get you a high-quality teaching profession brimming with human, social, and decisional capital! So what will?

THE RIGHT ANSWERS

We wrote this book to lay out a fresh approach to changing education and strengthening professional effectiveness that includes both the vision and a coherent set of actions to enact and sustain that vision. The ideas are based on a deeper understanding of teachers and teaching—of what it means to teach like a pro. Not only do we think the idea is accurate and attractive, but we also believe the action agenda is clear. People are motivated by good ideas tied to action; they are energized even more by pursuing action with others; they are spurred on still further by learning from their mistakes; and they are ultimately propelled by actions that make an impact—what we call “moral imperative realized.”⁸

But, as an educator, you can't make progress unless you start the journey in the first place, unless you take the first steps yourself. These first steps are the hardest. Dangers, risks, opposition, and disappointment all lie in wait. But professional capital can be both your armor and your sword. It can cut through the misunderstandings and misrepresentations of teaching. It can protect you against attacks on your profession. If you bring others with you, your strength and influence will multiply—especially if you include a few skeptics and even some naysayers along the way. Be determined that it can be done, by all of you together, and you will not be defeated in your quest.

In *Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tina Rosenberg shows how small groups have banded together using each other as peers to work against smoking in one state in the United States, against AIDS in Africa, and against a brutal dictatorship in Eastern Europe.⁹ In each case, it was peers, fighting against all odds, who joined together to bring about a social revolution. Their power came from the need for individuals to belong to something greater than themselves and to do something that would transform society for the better.

Their greatest accomplishment was not overpowering their external adversaries, but holding the group together during the difficult initial stages, through peer support and peer pressure. People care greatly about the respect of their peers. What Rosenberg uncovers is how these fragile groups ended up “persuading people [basically each other] to take action that is crucial to their long-term well-being but appears unpleasant, dangerous, or psychologically difficult today.”¹⁰ Rosenberg calls it “the social cure.”

Social media today carry additional potential for enhancing professional capital, but these media also have their pitfalls. For every Arab Spring there is a “London riot.” Technology may have a role in the development of social capital, but the “social cure” is ultimately and perhaps primarily about people and their values, not about technological innovation as the source of inspiration.

Mary Parker Follett, a community developer, writer, and business consultant, knew this over 100 years ago when she showed how *power with* is the source of new breakthroughs, as distinct from *power over*.¹¹ The husband and wife team of Joe Blase and Jo Blase, experts on micro-politics in education, are the most virulent critics of principals who exercise *power over* their teachers and who silence them by playing off teachers against each other, handing out undesirable rooms and assignments to their critics, renegeing on promotions they promised in exchange for their teachers’ compliance, and so on.¹² Yet the Blases are equally ardent advocates for principals and teachers to engage in *power with* each other to support energizing changes that benefit their students and the lives of teachers as well. Margaret Mead memorably observed: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.”¹³ Mead did not say that *individuals* working alone could change the world. She said that the *group* (albeit in the minority in the beginning) is the key to change—and with professional capital as its armor and political capital as its ally, this group can become very powerful indeed.