



When parents choose to start up a school

A social-capital perspective on educational entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Purpose – By exploring the unique networks of parents, this paper attempts to shed light on the assumptions of social capital theory, showing the advantages of combining bonding and bridging social capital for educational entrepreneurship.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper focuses on a group of Israeli parents who founded a new school. Data collection and analysis were based on the grounded theory perspective. In total, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted. Triangulation was achieved by studying the phenomenon from different perspectives: those of the founders, school employees, and people who supported the founding of the school. The data were analyzed using categorization techniques.

Findings – The paper finds that bonding and bridging social capital complemented each other. Whereas the former was employed to take advantage of existing opportunities in the community, the latter was used to explore new opportunities that would otherwise not be available. Moreover, it was found that both strong and weak ties may be used by parents to obtain scarce resources. The study shows that parents with cultural capital know the “rules of the game” and can therefore take advantage of network opportunities to ensure the school’s survival.

Originality/value – This paper reframes parental involvement, using social capital as a theoretical perspective. From this perspective, it uncovers the deeper aspects of the network dynamics and unique circumstances created when bonding and bridging social capital are combined.

Keywords Social capital, Education, Parents, Schools, Entrepreneurialism, Israel

Paper type Research paper

Theoretical framework

Parental involvement in formal education has increased over the past three decades. This represents a worldwide trend, as seen in decentralization and school-choice reforms, to accommodate customers’ needs and preferences (Hoxby, 1998; Whitty, 1997). Thus parental involvement, which once ranged from providing technical assistance to participating in decision-making, has forged ahead (Bauch and Goldring, 1995). Parents can now choose among various educational alternatives or even create their own. The involvement is more salient when parents are the animating spirit behind the establishment of a new school, as in the case of magnet schools (Goldring, 1991), or even more so in the case of charter schools, where parents have the authority to design and run the school (Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2004). However, when the initiation and administration of a school is in the parents’ hands, new questions arise. For instance,

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issues of accreditation, fundraising, and the relationship among the public, private, and nongovernmental sectors (Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2004) assume the central position that rational planning, participative decision-making, and resource allocation have when schools are founded by the Government (Holt, 1974; Jennergren and Obel, 1980).

Although parents may find it difficult to obtain recognition for their startup, their strength is based on their internal motivation and they benefit from the fact that theirs is a bottom-up initiative developed by and for the community and reliant on their connections (Grant, 2001; Joffres *et al.*, 2002). The present study attempts to characterize these connections and the parents' network and examines the contribution of a network to founding a school.

The network is a well-known concept used extensively in the study of entrepreneurship (Greve and Salaff, 2003; Hoang and Antoncic, 2003) in general and the survival of startups in particular (Baum *et al.*, 2000; Witt, 2004). It has been claimed that an entrepreneur's network can compensate for a lack of reputation, resources, and information when market mechanisms are not available due to the newness and small size of a startup (Bruderl and Schussler, 1990; Witt, 2004).

Although entrepreneurial networks are not typical of education, their relevance becomes evident as public funding for education decreases and pupil diversity and environmental complexity increase. In these circumstances, the state loses some of its monopoly over education and the notion of educational entrepreneurship gains strength (Eyal and Kark, 2004; Lange, 1988).

Educational entrepreneurship may be initiated by various groups of people: businesspeople who seize an opportunity to provide educational services; public leaders who seek to change the system from the inside in some fundamental way; or leaders of nonprofit organizations who found organizations on the fringes of the larger system in an effort to alter the system over time (Teske and Williamson, 2006). The power of entrepreneurs in education comes from their being agents of change whose efforts spur change in the larger system (Smith and Petersen, 2006). Thus, the label "entrepreneurial" has been applied to various educational contexts such as for-profit educational services firms, nonprofit charter schools, new programs within traditional school districts (Hess, 2006), and public schools (Boyett and Finlay, 1993; Eyal and Inbar, 2003; Eyal and Kark, 2004; Kerchner, 1988). Often, the educational entrepreneur must take risks in order to enhance productivity or offer new services likely to promote change (Cuban, 2006). Entrepreneurial endeavors may be classified by the degree to which they stray from conventional educational practices (Eyal, 2007; Eyal and Inbar, 2003; Eyal and Kark, 2004; Williams, 2006).

In education, however, network research is not related to parents' entrepreneurial behavior; rather, it focuses on the general utility of educational networks. For example, educational networks have been found to facilitate cooperation among educators, policymakers, parents, and other stakeholders (Clark, 1996). In addition, they are associated with professional renewal, educational innovations, and reforms (Lieberman and Grolnick, 1997; Lieberman and Wood, 2002; Ward and Pascarelli, 1987). Nevertheless, studies show that parental networks can influence the success of educational entrepreneurship. The few studies that have been done on parental involvement in local educational networks, for instance, relate it to the adoption of local educational reforms (Kahne *et al.*, 2001; Smith and Wohlstetter, 2001). Ties with public, for-profit, and nongovernmental organizations have been recognized as a major source

of the resources, expertise, and governmental and market recognition needed for the establishment of charter schools (Brown *et al.*, 2004; Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, parental involvement in community activity, which creates ties with powerful institutions, is associated with increased political power (Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2004). Nevertheless, although it has been argued that cooperation with powerful institutions can free a school from dependency on the market (Baum and Oliver, 1991; Geske *et al.*, 1997), it can also restrict its ability to adopt alternative, radical educational innovations (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2002). Thus it seems that unlike business networks, educational networks are highly dependent on formal ties with institutions that limit their freedom and therefore the scope of initiatives. Furthermore, internal contradictions within the network may be caused by different political or social interests of stakeholders (Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, although educational entrepreneurs can widen their network beyond the basic official ties, the result might be a false impression of independence, since many of these stakeholders are sponsored by the Government (Davies and Hentscheke, 2002; Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2004).

Based on these preliminary studies in the field of education, we can see that the shortcoming of research on parental networks is that it focuses on the overall value of the network and ignores the structure of the network and the quality of the ties. It is necessary to examine parents' entrepreneurial ability to utilize their network contacts, converting them into assets as entrepreneurs in other fields do (Witt, 2004). This conversion process is referred to in the literature as utilization of entrepreneurs' social capital.

Social capital can be defined as an actor's ability to use its social position to gain preferred access to scarce resources (Lareau and Weininger, 2003). Thus, exclusive or early access to either real or virtual resources through an actor's social relationships is the actor's "social capital", as it may facilitate the attainment of personal and organizational goals (Gabbay and Leenders, 1999; Lin, 1999; Portes, 1999). The same social mechanism is responsible for unequal access to entrepreneurial opportunities (Aldrich *et al.*, 1991; Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986).

Two forms of social capital are discussed in the literature on organizational networks that promote entrepreneurship: bonding and bridging (Davidsson and Honig, 2003; Putnam, 2000).

Bonding social capital develops in close relationships within homogeneous groups (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Under such circumstances, trust and reciprocity produce goodwill and cooperation among network members (McEvily and Zaheer, 1999). Network members, usually family and friends, are bound by strong ties (Granovetter, 1973) and provide the safety net for the startup. They offer mutual assistance, financial support (Bruderl and Preisendorfer, 1998), fine-grained tacit knowledge (Rowley *et al.*, 2000), and otherwise-hard-to-obtain services and labor for free or below market price (Haar *et al.*, 1988), and are willing to be the startup's first customers (Bruderl and Preisendorfer, 1998). Thus it has been argued that bonding social capital is mostly needed when startups are established, before they earn their reputation (Witt, 2004).

Unlike bonding social capital, bridging social capital is created in socially disparate, heterogeneous groups (Pittaway *et al.*, 2004). In these circumstances, actors belonging to several different networks can bridge structural holes between unconnected social clusters (Burt, 2000). These actors, usually acquaintances or business partners, are

bound by weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), but they can offer scarce information that is inaccessible to others (Burt, 1992). This extensive, non-redundant information facilitates the exploration of new opportunities that give rise to radical entrepreneurship (Baum *et al.*, 2000; Kaufmann and Todtling, 2001; Rowley *et al.*, 2000) and are essential for gaining “sociopolitical” recognition (Hoang and Antoncic, 2003). Such recognition – institutional approval by prominent players in the field – is needed for broad product dissemination, extensive fundraising, and the recruitment of specialized employees (Renzulli *et al.*, 2000), which together facilitate growth (Davidsson and Honig, 2003).

Thus it has been argued that a startup needs both bonding and bridging social capital to survive (Uzzi, 1996, 1997). Whereas the former is utilized to take advantage of opportunities in the entrepreneur’s surroundings (Elfring and Hulsink, 2003), the latter is used for exploring new opportunities (Bloodgood *et al.*, 1995). Bonding social capital can secure resources in times of uncertainty and insecurity; bridging social capital can mobilize collective, cross-border action and extensive lobbying for recognition (Elfring and Hulsink, 2003).

Too often, however, the usefulness of social capital is taken for granted and the mechanism by which social relations are transformed into resources is not studied. This is seen especially in the tendency of the social capital literature to ignore the fact that entrepreneurial successes are facilitated not only by network contacts, but also by cultural capital.

Cultural capital is the repertoire of habits widely shared by the elite (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). Unlike social capital, which is generated between people and refers to knowing the right people or networking (Throsby, 1999), cultural capital is a property of individuals (Mohan and Mohan, 2002) and may be obtained through socialization, formal education, or practice (Anheier *et al.*, 1995). It consists of high-status cultural signals such as attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, cultural goods (e.g. music and art), and academic credentials that are used for social and cultural exclusion (De Graaf *et al.*, 2000; Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Cultural capital is manifested in tendencies, use of the language, styles of interaction, ethical modes, social skills, and self-confidence (Morrow, 1999), and in technical, scientific, economic, or political expertise (De Graaf *et al.*, 2000). According to Bourdieu, all of these represent symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1986; Swartz, 1997); they legitimize high-status groups’ claim for recognition, deference, obedience, or the service of others (Swartz, 1997), helping them to create and maintain the structural conditions that protect their interests.

Although the convertibility of social and cultural capital has been discussed in the literature (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Swartz, 1997), it has not been studied in relation to entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, cultural capital may be regarded as a major facilitator in creating and exercising social capital. For example, cultural proximity promotes exclusive social networks (Anheier *et al.*, 1995). Furthermore, while social capital can provide information about financial opportunities, cultural capital is required to ensure successful communication with people of means (Dinello, 1998). Moreover, because cultural capital reportedly facilitates the decoding of implicit rules (Aschaffenburg and Mass, 1997; Bourdieu, 1991), its role in interpreting and acting on new information obtained by the network becomes crucial. Thus it seems that social and cultural capital can fully explain the entrepreneurial process only when considered

together. Surprisingly, although the empirical literature discusses the impact of social capital on entrepreneurial processes, it does not provide substantial evidence of the impact of cultural capital. Thus there is no way of knowing whether an opportunity detected within a given network is ultimately realized.

Moreover, the common interpretation of strong and weak ties as bonding and bridging social capital, respectively, has led to a rather simplistic presentation of the network (Davidsson and Honig, 2003; McEvily and Zaheer, 1999). It is therefore suggested that the notion that “information benefits are expected to travel over all bridges, strong or weak” (Burt, 1998) be further examined.

Using the social and cultural capital perspectives as a theoretical framework, the present study takes a closer look at the structure and quality of networks’ ties. This is done in order to explain how parents intending to establish a new school use their connections to obtain scarce resources.

The Israeli context of parental involvement in establishing schools

Traditionally, the Israeli educational system featured centralized control (Nir, 2002, 2003). This could be seen, for instance, in the system’s refusal to let parents be involved in schooling. These circumstances prevailed for over 30 years, until they were terminated during the 1980s for several reasons: First, cutbacks of approximately 25 percent in the hours allotted to schools for learning purposes led to “grey education”, i.e. parentally financed classes and programs in public schools (Goldring, 1993). Another factor was the emergence of community public schools designed to allow greater family involvement (Shapira and Goldring, 1990). Finally, the growing tendency towards pluralism promoted parental initiatives regarding magnet schools and schools of choice (Shapira and Haymann, 1991).

These processes indicated a shift in the collectivist ethos of Israeli society to a more individualist ethos that made possible the decentralization reform of the 1980s and the school-based management reform of the late 1990s (Gibton and Goldring, 2001; Nir and Eyal, 2003; Nir and Miran, 2006). These initiatives have increased parental involvement in Israeli schools (Goldring and Shapira, 1993) and sometimes even parental militancy (Nir and Ben-Ami, 2005).

Although these reforms were carried out with supervision and funding by the Ministry of Education, the level of parental involvement was often dependent on contextual elements such as parents’ socioeconomic status and the principal’s attitude towards parental participation (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999; Goldring and Shapira, 1993; Shapira and Haymann, 1991).

According to Goldring and Shapira (1993), parental empowerment and parental involvement represent two different processes that brought Israeli parents into schools. Parental empowerment refers to actual parental control in schools, generally expressed when the principal lets parents take part in decision-making. In contrast, parental involvement refers to participation or reactions by parents when they have no actual control over the educational processes in schools. Shapira and Haymann (1991) found that in ideologically based schools of choice (religious or nationalist), parental empowerment is more prevalent due to the likelihood that some of the parents were involved in establishing the school. In contrast, in content-based schools of choice (art and nature schools), parental involvement is more probable since many parents consider the choice itself a satisfactory level of participation. In addition, Goldring and

Shapira (1993) found that parents with higher socioeconomic status expect greater empowerment, and when they are not satisfied with the public schools, they may consider opening their own school. However, if these schools do not comply with state regulations with respect to curriculum, funding, personnel, and standards, they will not be “officially recognized” by the state. This means that they will not receive state funding and parents are liable to be sued. Nevertheless, when a school becomes “unofficially recognized” it receives up to 85 percent of its funding from the state (Shoshani, 2003).

To obtain unofficial recognition, the founders have to submit a formal request to start a new school and the school must be approved by the local, regional, and state education committees (Ministry of Education, 2003). Recognition is entirely at these committees’ discretion. Thus, parents who choose to start a school may face many bureaucratic obstacles when requesting government recognition.

Research questions

The present study attempts to answer the following questions: Can parents’ social capital compensate for the lack of government support when parents choose to start a school? What forms of social capital do parents use in founding a new school? What benefits are obtained from each form of social capital? How is social capital transformed into other forms of capital?

Methodology

The present study is based on a case study of a group of Israeli parents who employed their personal contacts to establish a “democratic” school in a small town. It is based on a qualitative discourse-analysis paradigm (Seidman, 1991; Sparadley, 1979). Although most network research uses quantitative methods (Hoang and Antoncic, 2003), it was argued that qualitative research is particularly appropriate when abundant, in-depth process-based network information is required (Coviello, 2005). Furthermore, it was suggested that qualitative research outperforms quantitative research in trying to understand the causes, consequences, and mechanisms assigned to a specific context in which a network is embedded (Uzzi, 1996). These advantages are especially important in a new field of inquiry such as this.

School characteristics

Unlike most Israeli public schools, which are funded and regulated by the state, this school is not recognized by the state, either officially or unofficially. In fact, some would argue that the school is illegal. Furthermore, this school can be described as a radical educational enterprise, since no government-mandated curriculum is enforced, the children control the curriculum, learning takes place in multi-age groups, and parents are heavily involved in what goes on in school. The school has 60 pupils from kindergarten to eleventh grade, most of them middle-class.

Participants

The participants can be divided into three groups: the founding parents, the teachers, and others who helped make this educational enterprise a reality.

Seven parents from among the four couples that founded the school were interviewed. They ranged in age from 36 to 43. Two have only high-school diplomas,

four have bachelor's degrees, and one has a PhD. Two of the seven parents interviewed have degrees in education and one of them used to work in public education. Currently, two of the women founders work in the school, one as a teacher and the other as the principal. Only one of the four families is financially well-off; the others are middle class and manage to "get by".

Of the six teachers, none of whom was part of the founding team, five – three women and two men, all aged 30-44 – were interviewed. Three of them have a BEd and two were trained in non-degree-granting institutions (one in music and the other in developmental psychology). One teacher previously worked for nine years in a public school, two worked for three years in democratic schools, one gave private music lessons for fifteen years, and one worked for three years in a preschool. All five have worked for the school from its inception and teach there full-time.

The last category comprises people mentioned by the founders or teachers as having had an influence on the process of establishing the school. They include the mayor, the director general of the municipality, the head of the municipal education department, a local politician, the coordinator of the philanthropic foundation that partially funded the school, and four community members (only one of whom had a child who subsequently enrolled in the school). This group is highly heterogeneous in all respects.

Procedure

This study employed a qualitative research methodology. Data collection and analysis followed the grounded theory perspective (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), according to which no specific hypothesis is tested, as conceptions are to be revealed only during data analysis (Erickson, 1986). However, based on the literature on startups, entrepreneurs' networks, and educational networks (e.g. Hoang and Antoncic, 2003; Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2004) it was assumed that parents would use their connections in establishing the school.

An open-ended method, in which the interviewer did not bring in a predetermined list of questions, was used to obtain the respondents' subjective conceptualization of the entrepreneurial processes (Mishler, 1986). The interviews focused on certain core themes: the processes involved in establishing the school and the ways in which obstacles were overcome. A preliminary analysis of data gathered in two separate interviews conducted by two independent researchers over a period of three months revealed that some subjects were brought up repeatedly by the principal: the fact that many community members and outsiders helped establish the school; that they offered various kinds of assistance including funds, supplies, services and sociopolitical support; and that this assistance was based on various factors: friendship, acquaintance, and kinship. The ideas that emerged were kept in mind when the rest of the interviews were conducted. However, each interview had its own dynamic that allowed each interviewee to highlight a different perspective on the entrepreneurial process.

Triangulation was achieved by studying the phenomenon from different perspectives (Coviello, 2005): those of the founders, school employees, and people who supported the founding of the school. The author conducted twenty in-depth interviews, each lasting 1-1.5 hours, over a period of six months.

The data were analyzed using categorization techniques (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), following Marshall and Rossman's four-stage analysis (1995): "organizing the data",

“generating categories, themes and patterns”, “testing any emergent hypothesis”, and “searching for alternative explanations”. This analysis strives to identify central themes in the data, to find recurrent experiences, and to link different categories to form central themes. The coding process was guided by principles set by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for comparative analyses. To ensure reliability, two independent researchers analyzed the entire data set (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The two sets of categories obtained from the separate analyses were compared and discussed (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). This procedure led to the identification of patterns of parental use of social capital in the founding of a school. To increase reliability further, the analysis was peer-reviewed by two independent readers (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). The final interpretations were presented to the school principal and to three additional members of the founding team. This was important in order to ensure that the ethnographic interpretation was not a forced one. Finally, some comparisons were made with the existing literature on startups and entrepreneurs’ networks so as to increase validity (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Findings

Three main findings emerged from the study. The first is that lack of recognition is the main difficulty involved in founding a school. The second is that bonding and bridging social capital, which the theoretical literature considers contradictory, are in fact complementary. The third is a demonstration of how social capital can be transformed into other forms of capital.

The burden of non-recognition

Although ascertaining this was not the main goal of the study, the literature review suggests that institutional recognition plays a major role in determining the potential scope of parents’ entrepreneurship. Therefore, a preliminary stage in the data analysis assessed the extent to which governmental recognition is applied when parents start a new school.

The interviews revealed that the founders’ main goal at first was to obtain recognition for their school from the Ministry of Education. Their request, however, was denied. As the principal described it:

We started this process a year before we opened the school. We submitted requests. When we saw it wasn’t going to happen, we found out about the option of getting recognized without being a state school, and we submitted requests for that ... The regional director [of the Ministry of Education] interfered and wrecked the whole process. The director general of the Ministry of Education said we were running away from the problem ... I said we weren’t running away; we had been chased off.

The Ministry’s opposition was not the only obstacle to founding the school. It was clear throughout the interviews that the “product” itself was hard to market. One parent claimed:

People are afraid to deviate from the style of education with which they are familiar. This is not a pre-existing method of education whose results we know in advance.

The interviews also revealed an interrelationship among recognition by the Ministry of Education, the municipality, and the public. One example is the vicious circle between government recognition and student enrollment. As the principal explained:

People wouldn't register until we had some kind of official recognition from the Ministry of Education ... [but] we would only be approved after we had enough students enrolled.

A second example may be seen in the impact of municipal officials' indecisiveness on government recognition. As one such official asserted:

They weren't prepared to follow through on the matter ... Because [the municipality's] support was not unequivocal, the Ministry of Education also had reservations about the school.

Because the school was not formally recognized, it was not eligible for government funding, which meant higher tuition. As a result, some students who had registered pulled out. As a member of the founding team described the situation:

The Ministry of Education should have granted us recognition, because without it the state won't give us funding ... [As a result] a lot of people left because they said it was too expensive.

Another consequence of non-recognition was that the government was constantly trying to shut down the school. The principal described the experience vividly:

September arrives, and with it comes a closure order.

Although non-recognition by the Government results in a constant threat to the school's survival due to a shortage of funds and repeated closure orders, it also means that the school is able to maintain its autonomy. The principal explained:

[The superintendent and regional director] ... tried to force me to teach the mandatory reading and writing curriculum. I told them no ... They insisted that two seventh-graders move back to junior high. We told them no ... So they didn't insist, because either way they weren't going to grant us recognition.

Nevertheless, we can easily understand why the struggle for recognition and funding became an ongoing mission. This struggle can demonstrate how parents use their social capital to ensure their school's survival.

Forms of social capital used in founding a new school

Data gathered in the interviews suggest that the founders initially employed bonding social capital, based on internal trust relationships within the community. The principal's personal acquaintance with municipal officials played a major role in bypassing the suspicions that are usually elicited by private educational initiatives.

The school principal stated:

They know me, so there was no fear that I was going to come into town and ruin something.

Bonding social capital also seems to have led prominent community figures to contribute money to cover tuition for low-income students. Many interviewees reported that community members helped in the actual construction of the school, motivated by a sense of commitment. The following quotation by the principal demonstrates this vividly:

Our enthusiasm was contagious and spread to all of our friends. For example, the paint factory sent a truck full of materials. Yossi told Dani the contractor about the school, and the pioneering spirit got them into the project because they had grown up in the city. The whole

business of doing something for society also made them want to do their part. The town's pioneering spirit is coming back. People are still giving us big discounts.

In fact, except in one instance, all of the raw materials, products, and work needed to renovate the school building were provided by community members. An example can be seen in the following quote by the head of the founding team:

The concrete contractor is a very well-off man with an orientation towards helping his community ... He came and said: "Tell me what you need". We told him we needed a new entrance to the school. He didn't do it by halves ... After that we needed a sewer line. He did the digging. It turned out we were wrong. He also did the digging for the second one. He paid for it and brought in the equipment himself.

The story of the founding of the school as told by the interviewees also indicates that bridging social capital, i.e. ties with actors belonging to several networks other than the one to which the founders belong, facilitated the entrepreneurial process. Two forms of bridging social capital can be discerned: strong ties with family and friends and weak ties with acquaintances.

The strong form of bridging social capital may be illustrated by the principal's relationship with her own sister. It seems that the sister, who lives in one of the larger cities in Israel, sent her daughter to a "democratic" school and had a lot of information about its philosophy and practices. As the principal said:

My sister sent her daughter to a [democratic] school in Jaffa, and I heard the daughter waking up her parents in the morning and asking them to take her to school. Something looked suspicious.

Another strong bridging tie may be evident in the principal's connection with a government minister (not the Minister of Education); this minister used his influence to have an official order to shut down the school rescinded. According to the principal:

A closure order arrived, so I decided to contact everyone and his brother ... The minister decided to help us because he's known me since I was born ... In short, the director general of the Ministry of Education got a ton of phone calls ... and instructed the regional director to patch things up.

An additional strong bridging tie was with a family friend – a lawyer – who provided free legal assistance in drawing up the school bylaws and constitution. The principal described what happened:

We let her see what we had written. She looked at it scornfully, told us it was rubbish, and said she would pay for a lawyer who specializes in bylaws to help us out.

The significance of that help was discovered when the constitution, by means of the principle of an absolute majority, thwarted an attempt by some parents to change the basic principles of the school and institute required classes.

The weak form of bridging social capital is illustrated by the parents' ties with a local politician who helped reverse the second closure order, using his political connections to put pressure on the Minister of Education. The politician explained the nature of the political game:

There are rules in the game of politics. I go to the minister and ask that the school not be closed ... If the timing isn't so good, I contact all the heads of local party branches in the

country and they say, “Dani needs help, so help him. Otherwise we won’t help you get re-elected”.

Finally, contact with a philanthropic foundation that eventually gave the school partial funding was made possible by the mother of one of the students, who volunteered in this organization but was not a member of the founding team. One member of the team recalled:

Everything is coincidental. One of the mothers had been [on the Israeli committee] for many years. There is a committee of . . . Americans who decide what to give to whom . . . She told us about this . . . She told us when it would be convening.

This foundation provided substantial financial support for initial organization and teacher training, and is still helping to this day.

How social capital can be transformed into other forms of capital

The data collected in this study show that the social ties that provide access to a philanthropic foundation can be utilized only when transformed through the employment of cultural capital, i.e. “speaking the inside language” of the elite group. This is illustrated by many examples:

- The principal’s meeting with the foundation’s coordinator and obtaining assistance in filling out the application demonstrate proactive behavior associated with the elite culture. Understanding what to write on the application forms increases the chances of getting through the first phase of the foundation’s screening process.
- The principal had informal conversations with the heads of the foundation’s steering committee to win them over before appearing formally before the committee. As the principal recalled:

I sat and talked with them for hours and answered their questions, and my English was good enough. They arrived at the meeting already committed.

Pulling strings behind the scenes is made possible by three aspects of cultural capital: knowledge related to the informal dynamics and micro-politics of steering committees; proficiency in English, which was not common among the other applicants; and self-confidence.

- When the principal finally appeared before the steering committee, she employed sophisticated humor and state-of-the-art marketing techniques. As the principal described it:

And then came our turn . . . I told them that I realized they were tired, and I hoped they would hang in there . . . for a few more minutes. They laughed. Fortunately, I had a presentation prepared . . . and I passed out booklets. They were in shock.

The principal’s social skills, style of interaction, and graphic skills were all advantages that enabled the founders to distinguish themselves from potential competitors and impress the committee members.

- The principal portrayed the project as a self-help community initiative, which was consistent with the foundation’s ideology. She asserted:

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What caught their attention even more was the community aspect. All the others . . . were applying because this was their job . . . We were people from the community who wanted to do something for the community. They were won over instantly.

By emphasizing the ideological ground shared by the members of the steering committee and the founders of the school, the latter were able to create a bond with the former. This accomplishment was a reflection of their cultural capital.

These cultural “tricks of the trade” succeeded, and the school received more financial support than any other project that had applied for funds. Since the founders are aware of the importance of their network, the school works hard at maintaining and strengthening its connections – for instance, by sending cards and welcoming visitors affiliated with the foundation.

The founders also used their cultural capital to win recognition. For example, they were aware that the easiest way for the Ministry of Education to shut them down was by detecting bureaucratic misconduct; therefore they carefully followed the Ministry’s safety regulations when renovating the school building and they adhered to the Ministry’s policy for appointing school principals.

The principal described being informed by the superintendent that she did not have enough experience to be principal. They immediately found a solution:

I told them it was no problem; I don’t have to be principal. So someone from my staff, with nine years of experience, stood next to me . . . and we switched the name.

Thus it seems that the founders’ cultural knowledge of the workings of bureaucracy, along with the creativity and flexibility typical of high-status groups, helped them overcome the bureaucratic obstacles that entrepreneurs usually encounter from state agencies.

The founders also understood that although decisions are formally made by the municipal plenum, they were really made much earlier when councilors were won over.

One of the founding team members described their strategy:

We sat and thought about who was the right person to approach. We thought about everything beforehand. We went one by one . . . [to] the head of the religious girls’ high school . . . We came with a baby because he likes kids . . . The Bedouin were important to the deputy mayor, so we took him to the Bedouin community, trying to convince them to join us.

This tactic demonstrates the founders’ cultural capital, evident in their knowledge regarding the micro-politics of local government.

They also realized that they could only obtain recognition through the judicial system; they therefore found an expert lawyer with experience in similar cases and petitioned the Ministry of Education’s appeals committee, which has an independent status and is equivalent to a district court. Using the lawyer’s cultural capital, the founders of the school tried to force the system to recognize their initiative.

After a lengthy process, six years after the school’s inception, the appeals committee ruled that the Ministry had to grant the school a license. “Unofficial recognition” is now being considered, and if it is approved, the school will receive partial state funding, which should help it survive.

Discussion

This study shows how government recognition remains a constant and significant point of reference for educational entrepreneurship by parents. The fact that the school was not recognized or funded by the state, combined with its use of radical pedagogy, made this educational “product” expensive and relatively unattractive. It seems that in a system where personnel is the main cost, reliance on coincidental or sporadic funding cannot replace constant and significant financial support from the state. Moreover, the survival of a school is under constant threat if it fails to obtain government recognition. This can be explained by the tremendous influence the state has on schooling through its regulatory powers and certification mechanisms. Thus, we can conclude from the present study that although radical educational pedagogies seem to be better off without governmental sponsorship (see also Boyett and Finlay, 1993; Eyal, 2007; Eyal and Kark, 2004), educational startups cannot survive without it. Although social capital may compensate for the lack of government support, it cannot dissolve the threat of closure.

Under these circumstances, it seems that the struggle for survival requires using all available connections. Indeed, the present study shows that the parents used their bonding and bridging social capital as well as their strong and weak ties to found the school. While bonding social capital is used to take advantage of pre-existing opportunities in the community, bridging social capital is used to explore the prospect of new opportunities that are not yet available. In addition, it was found that both strong and weak ties can bridge structural holes. Thus, when efficient, informal, pinpoint action is needed, strong ties can compensate for the redundancy of the information they supply because the trust, commitment, and goodwill in these relationships can get things done. Therefore, when employing social capital – bridging as well as bonding – individuals should consider the relative value of a tie, regardless of its strength, in the context.

The extensive use of parents’ strong ties for bonding or bridging purposes demonstrates that friends and family who work in different occupations and economic sectors, live far away, and mix with people in different social circles can broaden parents’ options for obtaining information, financial support, services, equipment, and political advocacy. Moreover, the present study shows that unlike in the business world, where different ties are traditionally used to obtain each type of resource, parents can use various forms of ties and social capital to meet the startup’s needs. In part, this may be because people tend to back educational initiatives that are designed to benefit the community or that fit their ideology more than they would support business startups whose main goal is to make a profit.

Given that parents use their network extensively and in varied contexts and that the network is inevitably necessary for the survival of their educational startup, one wonders what role coincidence plays in parental entrepreneurship. Although coincidences in parental entrepreneurship – such as casual or unplanned encounters or occasions when one just happens to notice an opportunity – cannot be ignored, there is a deliberate, intentional aspect as well. This aspect is manifested in three ways. First, the parents are engaged in deliberate networking and in ongoing maintenance of the network. Second, the founders carefully chose which ties to utilize, based on the circumstances. This is illustrated by the fact that they approached two politicians from different parties, depending which party was in power at the time, to have the official

closure orders rescinded. Third, and most important, when an opportunity was detected, the founders consciously used their cultural capital to take advantage of it.

In this case study, the founders' cultural capital represents a fundamental personal understanding of social conduct in context. The study shows that parents who have cultural capital in the form of social, political, and technical skills and are familiar with the elite discourse are aware of the rules of the bureaucratic, political, and entrepreneurial games and may act accordingly to facilitate the transformation of social capital into other sorts of capital.

The findings clarify the role of cultural capital in interpreting circumstances as opportunities and taking full advantage of opportunities discovered by the network. Thus it is proposed that when social and cultural capital are combined and utilized in a sophisticated, planned, and systematic way, little is left to chance.

Although the present study focused on the struggle to establish a school from the founders' perspective, some attention should be given to macro-level considerations. The research findings demonstrate that when no legal procedure is available for obtaining government approval of parental entrepreneurship, parents use all means available through their network. However, their success in bridging their way to local or national administrative agencies or to the professional bureaucracy, as shown in the present study, might give the impression that irrelevant political considerations or personal interests influence educational policymaking. In these circumstances, there is a danger that unsound management practices will exacerbate the already unequal access of different social groups to scarce educational opportunities. Although research has found that parents who practice educational choice have more social capital (Schneider *et al.*, 1997), the present study shows that they can use it not only to gather information on educational alternatives and to differentiate between them, but also to generate new options.

One drawback of this study is its retrospective approach. Due to the limitations of relying on memory, the time frame was restricted to five years (see also Coviello, 2005). Furthermore, at the time of the interviews, the startup team was still struggling for recognition. Finally, the use of multiple informants made triangulation possible and enhanced reliability (Coviello, 2005).

A more general criticism may be related to the use of a single-site case study. However, the exploratory nature of this study required employment of the qualitative paradigm. Using this method, the study uncovered the deeper aspect of the network dynamics in their social context and made it possible to address the network as a whole (Coviello, 2005; Greve and Salaff, 2003; Hoang and Antoncic, 2003; Uzzi, 1996). Thus, this study can be used as an illustrative example that opens the door to additional qualitative as well as quantitative studies.

Future research should examine whether the use of parental networks to establish schools is culturally bounded. As the present study was conducted in a small, centralized educational system, it is assumed that the founders had easier access to prominent decision-makers than they would have had in a big, decentralized system (Inbar, 1986). An international comparative study is needed to understand the impact of specific educational systems on parental entrepreneurship. In addition, scholars should examine the impact of various contextual factors, such as parents' socioeconomic status, environmental uncertainty, societal wealth, and governmental regulation, on parental entrepreneurship. Lastly, given that the dynamics that evolve

between a school's professional staff and other stakeholders may become complicated when parents establish and run a school, it is important to study the relationship between the internal characteristics of the startup and its survival.

From a practical perspective, the findings of the study imply that educational entrepreneurs can have greater success if they strategically plan their social networks to intensify their control over possible outcomes. Government decision-makers should, however, be aware of the unequal access of different groups to opportunities for educational entrepreneurship. It is important to discuss ways in which government intervention can correct the fundamental market bias by creating a public compensation mechanism, including systems of knowledge distribution, adult education, and public think tanks. The Education Ministry, as a policymaking body, should therefore find ways to empower the public at large and to facilitate universal access to entrepreneurial opportunities.

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