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Activating social capital: Parents' ways of getting involved in their children's education

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Abstract

This paper presents the accounts of a supplementary school which children attended alongside their regular school education in an urban school area in the town of Malmö, Sweden. This was arranged by a group of Arabic speaking parents, and the paper describes their aims, logic, means and methods. The major aims of the supplementary school activities were to support their children and help them in their schoolwork, to protect their cultural heritage and language. They also want to prevent their children from being influenced by "the culture of the street". For the mothers and fathers involved in it, the supplementary school activities represented a sort of symbolic capital in which various other forms of capital were invested, especially social and cultural capital.

This paper presents an account of the supplementary schools that some children attend alongside their regular school education. The accounts here are drawn from interviews, observations and field notes made between the beginning of autumn term of 2003 and some time in the spring term of 2004. The activities parents arranged were conceived as being of common interest and were aimed at the well-being of the children generally. For the parents involved in it, supplementary school activities represent a form of symbolic capital in which various other forms of capital were invested, especially social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), many of the children receiving education in their own mother tongue and getting extra help in different school subjects. Although there is a dearth of literature on supplementary schools both in Sweden and abroad, several aspects of schools of this sort have been noted in the literature. Most of the studies conducted thus far have dealt with the students and with those who manage and guide such activities. We will be concerned, not with assessing the effects of the supplementary school activities as a whole, but with examining this activity that appeared to be of particular importance educationally and getting deeper knowledge on the difficulties that parents face in trying to get involved in the education of their children at home.

What is a supplementary school?

We define supplementary school in a broad sense. It is defined as organised activities for the children aimed at promoting their success in school. Sometimes it is the parents themselves who teach the children school subjects or help them with their homework. The aim of organising supplementary schools could be ideological; minority parents want their children to build a collective identity in a society which alienates them from

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their cultural heritage. The reasons for participating in supplementary schools can differ; some parents want the children to learn more about specific subjects, cultural and religious matters, sometimes it is a way to keep the youngsters away from the street culture. For minority parents the supplementary school is often a place where children can be proud of their culture, language and origin.

Although supplementary schools are becoming increasingly important in the last decades for parents from minority backgrounds, there is a long tradition in Sweden of arranging activities, initialised by parents, outside school to promote children's success in school. Parents in the Labour Movement were sceptical to the more religious schooling in Sunday school, organised by the church, and wanted to build their own organisation (Persson, 1998). In Sunday school the children learned Christianity. In the early 1900s the Labour Movement organised advanced schooling for young children from six to ten, to prepare them to do better in school (*Sagostundsrorelsen*) (Hennen, 1979). It was usually parents who taught the children on Saturdays in the people's park. The idea was to give the children of working-class parents adequate education, as well as reading and writing skills. The education was politically influenced by socialistic values. This short historical review shows that parents for different reasons have organised or let their children attend supplementary school activities when the parents felt that the school could not fulfill the task of being a school for all children. This becomes evident in the case of minority parents and their children.

Reay and Mirza (1997, 2005) have examined how supplementary schools can provide safe spaces for alternative discourses concerning positions that differ from the dominant mainstream ones. Hall et al. (2002) compared the supplementary schools in two cities, Oslo and Leeds. They have highlighted the role of supplementary schools in raising educational achievement. Greese et al. (2004) have studied the role of supplementary schools in enhancing the sense of identity of learners, and explored how such supplementary schools provide support and encouragement of the learners' identities and promote flexible bilingualism.

Reay and Mirza (1997, 2005), referring to activities of this type as representing supplementary school, described the involvement of black women in arranging extra curricular activities for children in a black neighbourhood in London, largely hidden from public gaze. Networks of this sort are often established through the different ethnic associations in which parents are represented. According to Reay and Mirza the parents wish to give their children what the school fails to provide, in particular the parents' culture, which includes their language and their religion, arranging extracurricular activities after school and on the weekends for children between about 5 and 16 years of age. These authors found there to be more than 60 black supplementary schools in the inner section of Greater London, an area in which approximately 300,000 black people of Caribbean origin live. Reay and Mirza's studies (1997, 2005) illustrate how the investment of black women in their social capital and their use of networks within the black community is able to establish and to maintain the activity of supplementary schools there.

The background and the organisation of the supplementary school in this study

How parents' involvement in their children's education manifests itself can differ from the expectations that the teachers have. The teachers often expect the parents to visit the school spontaneously and to attend meetings the school arranges. Many of the parents that this study is concerned with have quite different views of how their involvement in their children's education should be expressed. Those parents who often fail to attend meetings and do not visit the school very often tend to not see themselves as being less involved in their children's education. Rather, they consider the roles they play to be outside the school itself and to be within the networks they already belong to. The parents who took part in the study spoke of supplementary school arrangements made available to children in the neighbourhood and in other parts of the city, which they generally considered to be a safe environment for their children and to be a form of parental involvement in the education of their children.

The group of parents who were involved in these activities consisted of four mothers and two fathers. The fathers of the children took the responsibility for the activities as a whole and for supplying the materials needed. The mothers had responsibility for the educational part since all of them were previous teachers in their home countries. They contacted other parents who registered their children and at the time of the study there were about 50 pupils between the age of 6 and 15 in the supplementary school.

The aim and the content of the supplementary school activities

Arabic speaking parents in the present study arranged for different activities for both the children and their parents after the parent-teacher association had been established. Here we will consider both the supplementary school arrangements that were set up and the 'invisible' role the parents can be said to have played to help their children in school and to prevent them from succumbing to the 'culture of street'.

It isn't that we're not involved in our children's education. The teachers sometimes might want to show us a lot more about what they think we should do with our children at home. We of course do take care of our children, it's not that, but it's that the teachers don't know what we do with our children outside of school. We have many worthwhile activities for our children and we belong to associations that often arrange many different activities for our children. But the school and most Swedes don't realise this and that we want the very best for our children, like any other parents. We do our best to give our children a good education, and even send them to Saturday school in Rosengård School. I think the problem is that we do it in our way. (Bahia, a mother, interview, 2003)

Teaching activities of this sort were conducted in the children's mother tongue, the children receiving help with several of their school subjects, such as maths and English. Efforts at cultural empowerment and identity building were also made. Some of parents expressed an increasing distrust of the formal school regarding certain of the subjects in the curriculum, such as the teaching of the mother tongue, of cultural studies, and of the history and geography of the parents' countries of origin. They gave their warm support to the supplementary school arrangements, which they conceived of primarily as

providing help with their children's homework and a way of protecting their own language and of furthering their children's cultural socialisation. As one of the parents said, 'What shall we call the Arabs if they lose their culture, religion and language? We would still call them Arabs, but we have to do the best we can, nevertheless, to protect our culture and our language.' According to the parents who were responsible for the extracurricular teaching their aim was to fill a gap that the school failed to fill. It also represented the parents' way of involving themselves in the school. According to them, their chances of becoming involved in the education of their children were limited, for this reason they preferred to do it differently. One of the fathers responsible for the extra teaching arrangements expressed his views of this activity as follows:

We arrange many different activities for the children. These activities are often carried on by us parents so as to give our children what the school fails to teach them. The lessons in their mother tongue that the children receive at school are not enough and the teachers there are often not qualified enough, or they speak dialects that our children have difficulties in understanding. We do this teaching because we feel our children need to learn two sides of things, the Swedish side and their parents' side. We often have difficulties in getting large enough rooms for holding the lessons for all the children we receive. The parents come with their children even from other parts of the city. The children often have difficulties with their homework and want also to learn better Arabic. We do our best to arrange either with some student or with persons who are good in Swedish to help the children with their homework. (Aziz, interview, 2003)

The parents involved in the supplementary school wanted their children not only to achieve educationally but also to be proud of their Arabic culture, language and origin. They were willing to invest economically to provide their children with a better education. For many of them, the fact of their children being Arabs and Muslims was a problem for their getting ahead in school and in life in general. Through the supplementary school, the parents wanted to give their children an identity. They would otherwise risk losing it due to stigmatising discourses and because of the parents' culture not being highly valued by the school. The parents wanted the supplementary school arrangements to make their children aware of who they were and of their parents' culture, in addition to providing them help with their homework. According to the parents the school did not place any emphasis on the gap there could be between what the child was learning at home and in school.

The help the children were being given in the supplementary school with the homework provides clear justification of the efforts made by the members of the parent-teacher association on the children's behalf. Activities of this sort were given high priority by the parents. They can be said both to contribute to the legitimacy of the parent-teacher association and at the same time to also partly de-legitimate the association through the activity being separate from the school.

The importance of the supplementary school

The term 'outgoing parents' is repeatedly used by the teachers of the supplementary school. These parents described the importance of such arrangements being located in an

environment in which their children could both study and be protected from being out in the street:

There are some parents who feel there are so many problems they need to help their children with that they give up. They simply don't know what to do. That's why, thanks to this parent-teacher association, the mothers have the opportunity to just sit and talk about their problems with their children. They need very much help. The school should understand that the parents sometimes cannot help their children, even if they want to, especially the boys. Often, the mothers already have so many problems. It's difficult for them. (Samia, a mother and teacher at supplementary school, interview, 2003)

The parents explain how their efforts to help their children with their schoolwork, with all the difficulties they had, began long before the establishment of the supplementary school arrangements, and would not have stopped even if the arrangements had been closed down. Their search for such school arrangements can be presented as clear proof of their interest in the schooling of their children.

This is the problem: the parents don't abandon their children. They despair; they don't know what to do. This is why I sought assistance. If we didn't seek assistance, one could say that we simply gave up, that we don't care. But we seek assistance and find it. No one can't say we don't care'. (Hamida, a teacher in the supplementary school arrangements, interview, 2003).

They understand very well that the school cannot provide their children with adequate help, and at the same time they are conscious of their own educational limits in helping their children; thus, they welcome being released from this heavy concern by others who may be better qualified or are simply interested in their children's education. Zahra describes this arrangement as a release. She uses the metaphor of 'removed a thorn from my foot'.

Zahra: That helped me very much; it removed a thorn from my foot, since even if I attended sessions with him at school I was unable to help him. Neither his attention nor his concentration was there; I couldn't give my children all the attention they asked me to with their schoolwork. Each day is completely filled up. One has to be here, there and everywhere.

L: Did you feel that you needed some sort of help?

Zahra: Yes, I needed help at this. I didn't know how I would manage (Zahra, interview, 2003).

Difficulties the parents faced in efforts to help their children

The parents described two major sets of reasons in explaining their difficulties and their frustration in trying to help their children do their schoolwork; difficulties of a relational nature and difficulties of an educational nature. These often exist in parallel.

Difficulties of relational nature

The parents often tend to speak of their relational difficulties in putting the child to work. Nader said:

I tried to help them many times but it was difficult. They don't listen to me and the relations became bad. They seemed to not grasp what I said to them. Their mother was better than I was. She is more patient than I am. Anyhow, I think it's better that someone else helps them and does this in a place where they can be together with their friends (Nader, interview, 2003).

The position the parents take and their status make it, according to them, not particularly easy to establish educational relationships with their children. Difficulties in controlling the child and the intense conflicts in connection with carrying out of homework show how much aroused emotions invade a relationship of attempting to assist in schooling. Some parents thus feel unable to control their feelings, or to achieve the sense of distance needed to free the relationship of such passions.

Children have so many leisure-time activities today that they are often busy playing computer games or watching TV rather than working with their homework. They often try to escape and make me forget about their homework. You see! We mothers have a lot to do, cooking food, cleaning, shopping and doing our own homework. They often throw their bags as soon as they come home and say, "Mother, we are going to our friends at our neighbour's house". They sit and play games as they decided to do after school. They often forget about their homework (Zahia, interview, 2003).

The expression 'throwing their bag down' is one used by some of the parents in speaking about a situation in which the children get rid of everything having to do with the school when they arrive home and of their refusing to submit to the parents' orders or advice when they encourage them to do their homework. This difficulty in controlling their children concerns both the girls and boys, but according to the parents it is even more the case with boys, largely because of the attraction exerted by the street or by computer games. Those working in supplementary school also endeavour to stabilise the children's behaviour in a place where they accept a certain degree of social control.

Before, I sent the children to a school located in another district, only two days a week. Now, it's near here and the children find it to be an opportunity to meet their schoolmates. My 10 years old son, is being protected. It's better that he learns some Arabic or does his homework instead of hanging around in the playground or in the street. I was always pushing him trying to get him to do his lessons. But he'd said, "I'm going to go and play a little bit, I'm coming!" And he didn't come. At the supplementary school, he knows that the hour is the hour, that he cannot come later. He goes there by himself now and he feels encouraged to do things since he can meet his friends there. He can't simply be alone in the play yard or in the street. He joins his friends. Nobody is annoyed, nobody is irritated (Hania, interview, 2003).

For certain of the parents, the difficulties boil down to the simple question of how they can succeed in putting children to work who often rebel against doing their schoolwork, whether by open revolt or by means of tricks. The children slow down and develop strategies of avoidance, of diverting their parents' attention so as to flee from their homework. Yet things are different with the teachers in the supplementary school.

Difficulties of educational nature

In discussions with the parents about how to make assisting their children in their schoolwork effective, the parents often tend to speak about their lack of knowledge of the subject matter or the language. Parents who mention language emphasise the impossibility of their helping their children. This does not necessarily mean their withdrawing at all from efforts to help, yet they feel unable to provide the concrete help their children are in need of when they ask for it. Some of the parents, of course, are well educated (often at a level higher than the Swedish parents are). But others emphasise fear of being inefficient and ineffective.

I arrived in Sweden in 97. My children were 6 and 8 years old at that time. Since I didn't speak Swedish very well, I didn't want to try to explain things to them in a way that would be difficult for them to grasp. My children often told me, Mom you explain things one way, but the teacher explains them in another way. It's often very problematic when the children get older and the lessons get to be more difficult. I used to ask my neighbour who has lived here for a long time, to help them with their homework (Zahra, interview, 2003).

For parents who attended school themselves, the difficulties increase as their children get further along in school. They succeed in looking after their children's schoolwork to some extent at least during the whole of primary school, but when their children enter secondary school the majority seemed to give up attempting to provide assistance they feel unable to give. The parents stress in particular the changes that have occurred in the methods of teaching, especially of reading and mathematics as compared with their home countries. They see this as complicating the task for them in helping their children. Thus, even if the parents do not challenge the 'educational approach' of the teachers when they express their points of view regarding changes in the methods, they note in their child's homework the new manner of making divisions and the innovations in the training of reading skills as a source of insecurity for them. These innovations fuel controversy and the parents' doubts regarding the effectiveness of the current teaching methods. Actually, the parents feel they are deprived of their knowledge and are prevented from providing their children support. Ashamed of their incapacity of following what their children do, some of the parents, instead of acknowledging their own inability, choose instead to defend their own methods. Of course, this trial of the old against the new is hardly productive. Bahia describes a conversation she had with her son while trying to help him.

Subtractions, he's unable to grasp them, me either, it's odd. I say to him. It's the same as an addition, but in reverse. This is the way one teaches him, I think that the trick of a child is that, it's subtraction but that he performs addition. Maybe it's here the problem lies. It's like division. A division for us was this and not something else.

Now, their division operation is a whole page, it's not logical. There's the multiplication, addition and multiplication that's all contained in division. It's pell-mell. They learn in a very different way. It's difficult to teach him to do the homework like the teacher wants them to be done. Then sometimes I say to him come, I'll show you a trick, it's easier to do it like this. For me yes, but for him it was not easier. Then I said: But I understand nothing about this trick. Then he said to me: "You didn't go to this school. You don't know anything". "Yes, but it wasn't like that when I went to school", I said (Bahia, interview, 2003).

This can be said to be an experiment in humiliation corresponding to the painful astonishment of children in acknowledging of their parents' inability to explain the things in the same way as the teachers do at school.

Limited help at the supplementary school

The parents at the supplementary school recognise their educational limits. They feel that being there for the children and making them feel that the adults are caring and are there for them is very important. These parents keep hope alive even though their methods and resources may not be sufficient. Hamida said:

We often manage to put them to work, They know why they are here and their parents often send them here on purpose to study Arabic or to get help with math or other school subjects that we can help them with. We approach the children and make them see the benefits of their succeeding in school. We keep motivating them and talk about how important school is. The older boys and girls often do homework by themselves here. They sit and work for an hour or two (Hamida, a teacher at the supplementary school arrangement, 2003).

Samia explained how she helps the children with maths in Arabic, which she feels is very important for the children to learn. She said:

We teach the younger children maths in Arabic. They learn how to count and take part in many games through which they learn multiplication, addition, division and subtraction. I think it is important for them to learn to count in their mother tongue. Many of the children do not know how to count in Arabic (Samia, interview, 2003).

The teachers at the supplementary school speak of their lacking knowledge of many things but their trying to help up to the limits of their own knowledge. They often concentrate particularly on teaching Arabic, as well as cultural and religious studies. Recruiting older brothers and sisters to help the younger children with their homework is also a strategy that was often found to succeed.

Summary and Conclusion

Crozier (2000) and Reay (1998) argue that parental involvement is often primarily a matter of the involvement of mothers. Reay declares that the involvement of fathers is often at more of a distance. In Reay and Mirza's (1997, 2005) study of supplementary schools the mothers involved were found rather generally to express a sense of

belonging, collectivity and solidarity. Just as in Reay and Mirza's study the mothers in the present study considered the supplementary school to be a kind of second home for the child, and also to provide clear educational gains. The mothers often brought their tea cans and sat in the staff room waiting for their children to finish school, having the opportunity there to speak of other things than simply the school and their children. There is this desire to stick together, which mobilises the mothers, despite the difficulties they face, its being a matter of setting up activities that compete with the normal school form. They emphasise in such activities the culture to which the parents belong, the cultural needs to be met and their respect for the wishes and expectations of the parents.

The parents, in investing their social and cultural capital, helped establish and run such activities. Reay and Mirza (2005) argue for social capital being gendered and feel that Bourdieu's conception of social capital ignores gender, calling attention to the notion of emotional capital, considering the mothers' investment of emotional capital in their children to be a source of their social capital. By emotional capital it is meant here to be the amount of emotion mothers have for their children which is a motor for their investment in social relations for the benefit and the wellbeing of their children (Reay, 2004). The parents believe it to be important to invest in social capital through emotional engagement and helping the children with their homework, using the legitimacy this help results in to carry on other useful work as well. Supplementary schools not only provide educational help, but are also considered to be a safe environment for the children, keeping them away from the culture of the street. The regularity of the contacts involved and their legitimacy facilitates closeness of the children to their parents. The supplementary school arrangements are considered to be a major activity for the parent-teacher association and a way of helping children to succeed both at present and in a long-term perspective, helping the school in its mission and also helping to develop leisure-time activities with the same aim of protecting the children from what they refer to as the culture of the street, i.e. drug abuse, theft, robbery and various criminal acts. There were cases on the other hand, in which mothers denounced this kind of schooling as schooling for leisure.

Participation in such arrangements was seen as legitimate for parents to direct children towards a set of objectives they were to aim at, or the setting of rules, something the school often fails to do. Yet one can reasonably expect a supplementary school to fulfil a variety of worthwhile missions, while the public schools remain the major institution created for educating children. It is completely comprehensible that the parents endeavour at the same time to keep their children in the race, that they seek allies to help them, and that the arrangements involved build up an identity of their own through following the wishes of the parents involved. The establishment of such arrangements can be seen as reflecting the difficulties of both educational and relational character which the parents face at home in trying to help their children. The Arabic speaking parents appear to place a great confidence in the supplementary schools. They appear also to accept the political and educational choices suggested by those responsible for the parent-teacher association, and they value the action of those parents who have taken the initiatives required. They have the conviction that even though it may seem naïve to think that the assistance they give the children can help them significantly in overcoming the barriers to success that the school alone cannot overcome, there is a genuine need of

efforts of this sort and doubts as to the ability of the school to accomplish all that is needed. The supplementary schools are being given an important task here.

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