

EXAMINING FEMALE ACHIEVEMENT AS A FUNCTION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

MARY ANN WALLACE

College of Education

APPROVED:

Elaine Hampton, Ph.D., Chair

Jorge Descamps, Ph.D.

Miguel Licona, Ph.D.

Nancy Tafoya, Ph.D.

Charles H. Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

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PREVIEW

DEDICATION

For the irrepressible light and love of my daughter Faith

PREVIEW

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EXAMINING FEMALE ACHIEVEMENT AS A FUNCTION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

by

MARY ANN WALLACE, B.S.

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to illuminate everyday ways in which relationships with teachers, friendship groups and familial influences generate social capital. Specifically, how does that capital positively shape females in terms of their success and academic achievement? Social capital and caring are the theories framing this study. Social capital as described by social scientist James Coleman (1988) is the result of social network, which ultimately provides resources to individuals within the group. The experiences, networks, relationships and resources developed in the secondary school setting that contribute to the bank of social capital for females are important indicators of female success. Also embedded in this study is the question of caring—that is, what are the elements of care afforded female students? Literature on caring and education strongly suggest schools foster authentic caring. Nel Noddings' (1984) philosophy of caring is an important perspective to consider when examining achievement. This study employs a qualitative research methodology known as portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Female achievement is explored through portraiture interviewing techniques and artifact examination. The results of this study identified several highly productive forms of social capital generated within the female participant's secondary schooling experience. Evidence suggests meaningful relationship development with teachers and students along with purposeful, authentic care-giving helped contribute to the participant's success during and after high school. The study provides those interested in progressive education and innovative schooling practices a glimpse into a social capital-rich, nurturing secondary schooling learning community.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This study examines female achievement as a function of social capital. A primary focus of this research is to reveal elements of schooling, that is, the experiences, networks, relationships and resources developed in the secondary school setting that promote social capital for females and, thus, promote female achievement. The ever-present gaps in female achievement, self-esteem, confidence and career opportunities give this study impetus to contribute to the existing body of knowledge pertaining to females and achievement.

Statement of the Problem

Academic achievement, career aspirations, marginalized career identities and inferior preparation for roles as breadwinner are issues currently discussed by critical and feminist literature on gender and schooling. Furthermore, female minority groups lag further behind their non-minority counterparts (American Association of University Women, 1991). Elements of schooling that hinder or promote female achievement — particularly within a minority-schooling context—deserve examination.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines female achievement as a consequence of social capital developed through secondary education. Numerous studies have examined the function of social capital in groups or network structures (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Kilpatrick, Field & Falk, 2003; Leonard & Onyx, 2003; Paxton, 1999; Putman, 2000;

Ream, 2003; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994).

Social theorist James Coleman (1988) posits social capital is not an intrinsic feature of social networks. Rather, it comes into being whenever social interaction makes use of resources residing within the web of social relationships. The experiences, networks, relationships and resources developed in the secondary school setting that contribute to the bank of social capital for females are important indicators of female success and, therefore, warrant further study.

Significance of the Study

During a time when female achievement levels are considered to be lagging behind, especially among minority females, it becomes increasingly important to examine and reexamine schooling practices. Even though today's popular educational mantra, "No Child Left Behind," is on the lips of every policymaker, mandated-test creator and accountability monitor, females are indeed being left behind—behind in self-esteem and confidence, behind in academic achievement and behind in marginalized career pathways. Examining female achievement within the context of secondary schooling provides critical insight within a pivotal window of time in female academic and social development. Many young girls teeter precariously on the cusp between achievement and failure, and understanding the factors related to female achievement merits examination.

Research Questions

This study is framed using Coleman's (1988) social capital theory and caring theory as set forth by Noddings (1984). Portraiture is used to examine indicators of

female success—from the perspective of one female—that are generated by social capital developed in the secondary school setting. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What factors influenced academic achievement for the participant?
2. What relationships, support systems and resources shaped the behaviors, attitudes and aspirations of the participant?

Organization of the Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 discusses social capital theory and caring philosophy and reviews the related literature. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology, including selection of the participant, ethical considerations, procedures and data analysis. Chapter 4 provides a richly-constructed, narrative portrait of the participant. Finally, Chapter 5 analyzes the data collected from the portrait in relation to supported literature. Repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, cultural and institutional rituals, and emergent themes are described as developed through portraiture. Also discussed in this chapter is a theory of additive schooling grounded in social capital theory and caring theory. Implications for schools, teachers, administrators and students are also included in this chapter.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The literature review on social capital and on education and caring provided useful insight into understanding schooling practices that either help or hinder female achievement. The dynamics of schooling are examined through two scholarly points of view: social capital theory (Coleman, 1988, 1990) and care philosophy (Noddings, 1984). These scholarly postures provide strong foundations for intellectually challenging and nurturing school communities. Relationship-building becomes increasingly important when the resources residing within the relationships promote achievement; female achievement, then, can be examined as a collective process. Understanding this collective process helps females emerge with a strong sense of self and less likely to enter adulthood lagging behind.

Social Capital Theory

The concept of social capital was popularized by social scientists Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988, 1990). Bourdieu clearly defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group” (1986, p. 283). However, social capital is more than just a network of people who know each other. These ties must be reciprocating, trusting and positive (Bourdieu, 1986).