Education and Social Cohesion: Re-Centring the Debate

Education is a powerful generator of social capital. According to recent research on the USA, Italy and the UK (e.g. Emler and Frazer 1999; Hall 1999; Nie et al. 1996; Putman 1995b, 2000), more educated individuals tend to join more voluntary associations, show greater interest in politics and take part in more political activities. They are also more likely to express trust in others (social trust) and in institutions (institutional trust), and are more inclined to ‘civic co-operation’ – or at least to profess that they do not condone ‘uncivil’ behaviour. Education is clearly not the only factor that predisposes people towards joining, engaging and trusting, but it is a powerful predictor, at the individual level, even when controlling for other variables such as wealth, income, age and gender. To Robert Putnam (1995a, p. 667), current doyen of social capital theorists, ‘Human and social capital are clearly related, for education has a very powerful effect on trust and associational membership, as well as many other forms of social and political participation’.

Precisely how education contributes towards civic engagement and social capital, and under what conditions, is not yet well understood. We know comparatively little about the mechanisms through which learning influences different kinds of individual social behaviour, the contexts within which such effects occur, and how and why they change over time in different countries. Social capital theorists who have specifically addressed questions about learning, notably James Coleman (1998), have mostly treated education as an outcome of social capital rather than as a cause. Those, like Putnam, who do take it as an independent variable have not generally gone beyond describing statistical associations between levels of education and social capital outcomes. Outside of the social capital debate, there have been some social psychologists and political scientists (e.g. Emler and Frazer 1999; Nie et al. 1996),
who have sought to provide causal explanations as to how these effects occur. However, their analyses remain largely at the level of the individual.

What none of this work has begun to do is to provide the theoretical and empirical links between education and social cohesion at the macro societal level. In fact, arguably, none of the traditions above have a conceptual apparatus designed to address this question. Writings on education and civic participation see education as providing individual resources of skills and knowledge which can facilitate certain individual social behaviours, but they tend to address societal effects through individual aggregation rather than analysis of societal institutions and cultures. Extrapolating from individual effects to societal effects may require more than simply grossing-up of individual outcomes, since individual effects may be relative or ‘positional’, as Nie suggests with his theory of education effects on political engagement through competition for limited network-central positions in society (Nie et al. 1996). Social capital theory, despite using the language of individual resources and the deliberate analogy with human capital, claims to treat the ‘norms, networks and trust’ that constitute its central concern as properties of social relations as well as individual attributes (Coleman 1988). But the theory was first extensively developed by Coleman to apply to local communities, and has arguably been subsequently most successfully applied at that level, rather than at the level of whole societies (Woolcock 2000).

The assumption common amongst social capital theorists that countries with communities rich in social capital will also usually be more cohesive as societies is largely unexplored in the literature and highly debatable, since in reality this all depends on the norms and values of particular constituent communities and whether the different communities are at war or at peace with one another. Some countries cited in the research as having rich deposits of community social capital, such as contemporary Northern Ireland (Schuller, Baron and Field 2000) and 1950s America (Putnam 2000), would hardly be considered models of social cohesion on any of the traditional measures of the latter.

Clearly, it does not automatically follow that because education raises levels of community participation amongst individuals, it will also increase societal cohesion. Nor does it follow that the mechanisms through which learning generates community participation and social capital are the same as those by which it may help to promote societal cohesion. Yet these are rapidly becoming key assumptions of policy makers in America and the UK, who see lifelong learning as promoting