

A Capital Idea

by Andy Hargreaves

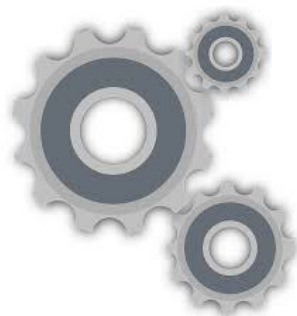
“Capital relates to one’s own or group worth, particularly concerning assets that can be leveraged to accomplish desired goals (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).”

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 in schools themselves as for-profit enterprises. In the estimates of some multinational moguls, this is a massive \$500 billion market.



When education is organized to get quick returns on business investment, and to increase immediate returns by lowering that investment, it favours 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 towards teaching is advocated aggressively in the US and gaining ground in places like the UK, 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. 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 has to 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 Pittsburg, 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 measurable difference to 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 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 4th and 5th 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 centred on instruction, and was based on feelings of trust and closeness between teachers.

Leana also obtained the mathematics scores of the students at the beginning of the year compared to the gains by year-end. She found that teachers with high social capital increased their mathematics scores by 5.7 percent 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) had 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". In short, high social capital and high human capital must be combined.

Since it is necessary to have both high human and social capital, the question remains how to 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 replacing all the bad individual teachers with good ones, or by parachuting in an outside intervention team are doomed to get 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 do 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 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!

For video-follow up on Professional Capital in seven and a half minutes, please go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7LQhLX2Wek>