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VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN COMMUNITY GROUPS: SOCIAL CAPITAL, EDUCATION AND EQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Vocational education can mitigate class and ethnicity divisions by providing access to career opportunities to individuals across the socio-economic spectrum. Social and educational disadvantages reinforce each other, however, which maintains unequal access to training. This paper proposes that local-level community organisations provide an intervention point into this cycle of exclusion. It argues that linking vocational training projects with local-level community organisations enables them to draw on the existing social capital of these organisations, yielding more successful training for their members by facilitating access to training through targeted practical support; by underpinning relevant and effective guidance; and by providing role-models and mentors. Finally, it draws on primary international research to show that the training advantages that local-level organisations can provide are valued by employers and vocational training practitioners, confirming the potential benefit of such interventions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Implicit in the contemporary sense of a democratic society is the idea that every individual deserves not only political equality, but also as equal an opportunity as possible to make his or her way in the world. In an economy which pays a large premium for both knowledge and skills, education is a key part of ensuring this kind of equality. Providing equal chances for individuals to develop the types of skills which facilitate their integration into the economy, however, is not straightforward. A large number of factors, such as household income and the existing education levels of household members, condition the impact of a given educational opportunity on an individual, and it remains a complex challenge to ensure that the economic advantages that education provides are fairly distributed in any society.

In addition to the effect of income and the human capital endowment of the household, there is increasing evidence that social relationships condition both the process of acquiring education and skills, and the ability of an individual to convert these skills into employment opportunities. Unlike household income or educational attainment, however, there is much less agreement on the extent to which social relationships constitute a resource, how this resource should be measured and how it functions to promote or impair educational outcomes. These disagreements give rise to conflicting findings. To take just one example, a number of studies (Carbonaro, 1998; Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Sun, 1999 cited in Dika & Singh, 2002) support Coleman's finding that closed social networks improve school performance within those networks (Coleman, 1988). Morgan and Sørensen (1999), on the other hand, find that closure is negatively related to mathematics performance across a broader range of schools, and Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch (1995) argue that while social capital is important, it operates by mediating access to institutional resources, rather than through closure as such.

This paper focuses on one particular effect of social relationships on education and economic integration. It analyses a set of regularities in the qualitative literature documenting the effect of conducting skills training within groups which either by nature or design, function as community groups. By looking closely at whether and how community provision is able to facilitate skills training in adult education settings, this paper focuses on the kinds of social relationships which are potentially valuable in the learning process. It outlines three ways in which these relationships can facilitate economic integration for those from disadvantaged groups: by facilitating access to training through targeted practical support; by underpinning relevant and effective guidance; and by providing role-models and mentors. Further, it draws on recent research which shows that these features are relevant to the vocational training concerns of employers and trainers

internationally. Finally, it contrasts the effect of social relationships on skills training and the job search process, and points out that social relationships mediate these two processes in different ways, but that both should be considered in trying to understand the ways in which equality of opportunity for citizens is conditioned by the social world.

2. SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

The paper uses the ideas of social capital theory to analyse civil society and its constitutive relationships as a resource that is available to both individuals and groups. It accepts the central insight of the developing social capital literature, namely that social relations provide a variety of resources for both individuals and groups, and that these resources are a function of structure of the social relations within which an actor is located (Adler and Kwon, 2002:18). It distinguishes between different types of social relationships, defining strong ties as relationships which are intensive in time and attention, and are likely to be found in close-knit networks, where individuals all know most of the other individuals in the network. 'Bonding' ties are defined as ties which knit individuals back into these networks of strong ties (following Woolcock, 2001:71-72). Weaker ties are ties characterised by less time and attention, and are more likely to span different groups. Gittel and Vidal (cited in Woolcock (2001)) refer to ties which join different social groups as 'bridging' ties.

These reciprocal relationships, or ties, generate externalities which can broadly be categorised as informational externalities, norms, and trust externalities (Coleman, 1988:S102-S105). These externalities are available to others in their networks, and potentially yield benefits to either individuals within the group, the group itself, or both.

Adler and Kwon (2002:19) point out that the social capital literature includes three primary ways of conceptualising social capital. The first focuses on an individual actor, and the resources his or her external linkages (bridging ties) provide to him. For example, individuals within a group may have access to information regarding employment opportunities as a by-product of their participation in a social group. The individual's social ties constitute a resource on which he or she can draw in this context. The second conceptualisation focuses on how the nature and structure of social ties within a group may allow that group to pursue collective goals more efficiently because of increased cohesiveness. For example, where ties lead to strong norms of honesty within a group, this may reduce the transaction costs of doing business for all members of that community, and therefore constitute a resource available to the group as a whole. As Adler and Kwon point out,

these two conceptualisations are largely determined by the unit of analysis, and are not necessarily in opposition to one another. There is therefore research which is neutral between these two perspectives, such as Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998:243) who define social capital as 'resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit'.

This paper focuses on the second understanding of social capital. Its focus is on the bonding ties within community groups, and it proposes that these ties create externalities which support the transfer of vocational skills within that group in three specific ways. Firstly, high levels of information which are gained through the multiple, time-intensive, overlapping interactions that characterise community groups can be used to tailor practical and financial support to the exact needs of the group. Secondly, these high levels of information can be used to provide particularly relevant guidance for learners during the learning process, and as they seek employment. Thirdly, these multiple close ties enable learners to identify with the group, and make mentoring and role-modelling more effective. In other words, they are able to create norms of supportiveness and success in training within the group.

3. A REVIEW OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL CASE STUDIES

The paper will consider a series of case studies which support these claims. These case studies are of two kinds. First, a number of news reports were gathered over a period of three weeks using Google news alerts which searched for vocational training success stories. The paper analyses commonalities in the success factors reported by participants and training practitioners, and shows that these common factors give *prima facie* evidence that the social capital provided by community groups contributes to successful vocational training.

Secondly, empirical studies which show that community provision of vocational training can have an advantage over other ways of delivering this training were reviewed. This review showed that the participants and practitioners in the studies identified the same specific social capital factors as instrumental in achieving good results as the news reports.

In addition to these case studies, studies that specifically investigate the effect of social capital on adult education were examined. The paper extends the case studies by looking at *how* the interactions that form the social ties constituting the social capital in question produce the resources documented in each of the case studies.

It will be argued that these layers of evidence show that the hypothesis that 'bonding' elements of social capital present in civil society groups promote positive outcomes (high pass rates, good transitions into work or further study), is consistent with both self-reported and observed accounts of the important characteristics of successful community vocational education and training provision.

3.1. Informal accounts of the success of community groups in providing vocational training

The three week internet scan for "vocational training success stories" turned up a number of cases which showed similar characteristics. Notably, many of the successful training groups shared a structure: many of the case studies were community-based, drew on a pool of individuals who were similar in some way, and further, were constructed in such a way as to foster ties of mutual support and friendship between the participants analysed. Two representative examples illustrate these similarities. The Fife Women's Technology Centre in Scotland offers internationally recognised information technology qualifications to unemployed women, with joint funding from the local council, the European Social Fund and local businesses. The centre focuses on women, tries hard to provide women trainers, and specifically aims to build the confidence of the trainees at the same time as equipping them with skills. In India, the e-Seva project is a local government initiative established in 2002 in an isolated region of Andhra Pradesh. Under the scheme, local self-help groups of women are given access to interest-free government loans with which to set up an electronic service liaising between citizens and local government. These groups are again focused on a specific group, which was structured to provide mutual assistance and encouragement during the learning process.

Aside from their structure, the successful training programmes also credited a similar set of factors for their success. Firstly, the courses had been made accessible to the learners through a combination of practical and financial support. For instance, in the Fife project, childcare was provided, the courses ran during school terms, and financial support for both training and transport to and from the courses was available. In the e-Seva programme, government funding and infrastructure sharing enabled women with no capital of their own to start viable service businesses.

Secondly, almost all of them included a substantial component of personal support, counselling and guidance, and both participants and trainers regularly cited these as important as factors

which made an important difference in allowing the participants to successfully complete the course and use the skills they had gained in the broader world. In a further example at Hampstead Bible College, a church-run training institute which has an excellent record of equipping ethnic minority students with IT skills, the trainers emphasise the importance of encouragement, and identification with the staff and trainers for the success of their programmes.

These commonalities in a selection of informal reports suggest that community groups may have certain advantages as a setting for vocational training. The section that follows shows that this is supported by a number of empirical studies which present evidence that community provision can yield an important set of benefits, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, it shows that these studies isolate a number of the same factors as key to the success of the training as highlighted in the review of journalistic reports.

3.2. Studies of community provision of vocational training

Durnan and Boughton (1999) studied four aboriginal-controlled further education colleges in Australia. These colleges operated entirely within local aboriginal communities, delivering training within a pre-existing, closely-knit group. They found that the students in aboriginal-controlled colleges had a pass rate of 62.2%, far exceeding the pass rates for aboriginals in non-aboriginal controlled colleges (45.0%) and even slightly exceeding the pass rate for all students in vocational training (59.2%). The level of the courses taken in these colleges compared favourably with those nationally: only 29% were preparatory level courses (compared to 47% nationally), and 24% of students were enrolled in advanced courses (compared to 8% of indigenous students in non-aboriginal controlled colleges).

These results are particularly noteworthy when one considers that they were achieved in a group that had lower average levels of education when entering vocational training (46% of students in these colleges had not completed year 10, compared to 28% of indigenous students nationally, and only 7% of non-indigenous students). Furthermore, the group in question experienced significant social challenges. Nearly a third had experienced bereavement or serious stress in the year preceding their training, a fifth were single parents, nearly a fifth had been arrested or spent time in jail, and a further 20% had a history of alcohol abuse. Given that the pass rates are based on comparable data, and that the results cannot be due to favourable initial circumstances (such as high parental or neighbourhood human capital, or advantageous socio-economic circumstances), these figures lend support to the hypothesis that community provision has an advantage over comparable non-community provision in certain respects. Clearly, there may be

other important advantages which are not served well by educating individuals within existing groups, and no suggestion is made here of educational segregation. The study does, however, illustrate that drawing upon the resources of communities can yield educational benefits.

Rommes, Faulkner and van Slooten (2005) explore ICT training in women-only groups. Their qualitative study draws on the experiences in two training facilities, one in Edinburgh (the Edinburgh Women's Training Course - EWTC) and one in Holland (the Vrouevakscholen - VVS), and used interviews and questionnaires with current students, trainers, and graduated students to capture the effects of the women-only training process in the classroom and after graduation. Pass rates are not cited as a measure of success, as both projects had extremely high pass rates, in part due to the selection processⁱ, and this qualitative study does not compare their success directly with a control group. Both of these projects, however, showed success in getting women into work: 80% of the VVS graduates found work within a year, while more than half of the women in the EWTC found work, or enter further studies. These results should be considered in the light of the fact that the women in both studies had been out of the labour market, and the EWTC targeted women who were 'unemployable' at their current level of skill. Both courses targeted women who had extremely challenging socio-economic circumstances, and heavy child-care burdens.

In their anthology of 10 studies of adult education within community groups, Falk, Golding and Ballatti (2000) explore a number of community groups which have succeeded in providing effective training for particularly hard-to-reach groups in Australia. In one example, the African Women's project in Maribyrnong, which taught English through group story-telling, equipped refugees from the horn of Africa with literacy skills, and facilitated their entrance into further language classes and other educational opportunities (Ballatti, 2000). In another area, the Robinvale Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group set up a centre which was successful in attracting disaffected Koorie youths into an accredited training programme, in an area where traditional schools have low retention rates (Golding, 2000a). Further, a community literacy programme based in Cobram improved the literacy, job-seeking skills and confidence of marginalised women who were not successful in the non-community literacy programme run in the same town (CLRA & Golding, 2000).

These studies lend empirical support to the idea that vocational training conducted within a group has advantages over training provided for a similar demographic outside of a community context, although they admittedly only deal with a limited number of cases, in quite different community contexts. What makes them more convincing support for the hypothesis, however, is that they isolate a number of the same key success factors, and these factors relate directly to the solidarity and strong ties which characterise both the groups in question, and the groups in the journalistic

'success stories'. In other words, they support the idea that the structure of these training groups can lead to beneficial externalities in the context of training.

4. KEY BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY PROVISION

Firstly, in combination, these studies suggest that the multiple, time-intensive, overlapping interactions that characterise community groups yield high levels of information, which can be used to tailor practical and financial support to the exact needs of the group.

Durnan and Boughton (1999) document the kinds of support that individuals at the aboriginal-controlled colleges in their study received. They find that 84% reported receiving assistance in obtaining financial support, 69% reported support in meeting family and community obligations, 63% reported help with transport to and from courses, and 38% reported receiving counselling during the course. Although their survey design does not allow them to directly link these types of support with the above-average success of the programmes, the data they collect concerning barriers to further vocational education and training enrolment suggests that these forms of support address the most important issues that prevent individuals in the community from participating in vocational training, and strongly suggests that they were important in the effectiveness of the programme.

In Golding's study (2000a), he found that the success of the Robinvale centre for Koorie youth was in part due to the fact that the course was not only culturally appropriate but also modularised to accommodate seasonal agricultural work and life events such as pregnancy.

The ability to design a package of financial and practical measures which make such courses truly accessible is predicated on a fairly nuanced understanding of their needs and challenges, and this puts community groups, characterised by fewer, more intense, knowledge-rich ties, in an advantaged position. The idea that community provision can facilitate this kind of targeted practical support is sustained by Seddon and Billett's study of community partnerships in vocational education and training, where they argue that "local partnerships make a difference by identifying, acknowledging and addressing local needs" (Sedon and Billett, 2004: 13).

Secondly, the high levels of information about the individuals in civil society training groups has the capacity to yield a further positive externality. This information can be used to provide

particularly relevant guidance for learners during the learning process, and as they seek employment.

At a simple level, this type of appropriate guidance can help learners to bridge the gap between training and the application of the skills they have acquired. Messerli and Abdyakaparov (2008) examine the impact of attempts to increase community participation in existing local vocational training institutions in Kyrgyzstan. They found that when there was community participation in developing the curriculum and teaching the courses, the students were better able to apply the knowledge that they gained in the courses in their (mainly agricultural) work.

This guidance, however, is not restricted to vocational learning. The suggestion is that where teachers and other learners have a clear idea of the challenges that a disadvantaged learner faces, they are able to give more appropriate guidance to learners as they take their skills out into the working world.

The qualitative approach of Rommes *et al* (2005) is able to draw this out as a key success factor more directly than Durnan and Boughton's study. Analysing the responses from founders, trainers, students and graduates, they conclude that while accessibility issues such as finances and time were key in facilitating participation, raising confidence and self-esteem was identified as the single most important factor in equipping the women to make successful transitions out of the course. In turn, building this confidence required a package of measures very similar to that provided in the aboriginal colleges, including a supportive environment, experienced female trainers, the existence of positive role models in the trainers and the fellow trainees, and confidence-building as an explicit course objective (Rommes *et al*, 2005:293).

As with the aboriginal colleges, these success factors depend on the existence and fostering of a network of strong and close relationships. Mentoring, personal support and role-models are particularly dependent on the numerous contact hours and mutual in-depth knowledge about the circumstances and motivations of the group members that characterise close-knit groups.

Thirdly, multiple close ties enable learners to identify with the group, and make mentoring and role-modelling more effective. The structure of the group enables individuals to identify themselves as part of a new group, to which certain expectations regarding behaviour and performance are attached. In other words, these groups can allow certain positive norms to develop in communities which may counter previous negative educational and work-associated norms, such as 'women like me don't become information technologists'.

The role of close ties in generating positive educational norms has been explored by James Coleman (1988:S105), who argues that a dense network of ties can effectively reinforce norms in favour of education, as well as yielding other benefits. Coleman's research focuses on the effects of intergenerational closure on school achievement, and argues, in part, that in a dense network of relationships, it is easier to monitor and sanction behaviour which contravenes an established norm. If the norm is a positive educational norm, his argument suggests that this will support higher educational achievement.

The studies examined in this paper provide some evidence that the operation of norms within the tighter-knit networks that civil society groups provide was important in the success of vocational education provision as well. There is not, however, a straightforward link between a network of close ties within the community and the reinforcement of close ties (and in fact Coleman's work has been criticised for failing to take into account that closed networks can reinforce negative educational norms just as easily as they can support positive ones (see Portes, 1998)).

Instead, what the examples of vocational training in civil society groups show is that the structure of the group is a resource which has the capacity to magnify supportive training, which explicitly aims to create positive educational norms within the group. In the cases considered, it appears that encouragement and support was effective because it was delivered within a set of personal relationships as well as educational relationships. The training was delivered within what were admittedly thin, partly closed social networks, but these were nevertheless much more tightly knit than networks between learners in non-community training institutions, and this seems to have an important effect in every case considered.

For example, Rommes *et al* (2005) report that in both the women's ICT training programmes they studied, when the trainees identified with the group, it increased their sense that the norms of competence and success being fostered in the classes could apply to them. A key to success in the programmes was that trainees encouraged and supported one another, and that this happened "quite readily once the women get to know each other and realise they are 'all in the same boat'" (Rommes *et al*, 2005:303). Lending support to their suggestion that the trainees are positive role models for each other, one of the trainees said, 'They are all women that have had certain bad experiences... and I find it so impressive that still all of them did it' (Rommes *et al*, 2005:303).

Falk, Golding and Balatti (2000) also find that the sense of identity and acknowledgement that community training groups can provide is central to the effectiveness of their training activities. In Golding's (2000b) study of Future Connections, which delivers accredited vocational training to marginalised young people in a community setting in Bendigo, Australia, he shows that both trainers and participants emphasise that enabling young people to identify with the group, and feel comfortable within it was central to the success of the centre. One trainer, Matt, explained the failure of many of the young people in their target community to become qualified and find jobs as an issue of identity: 'Why are they the ones who are out of work? ... A lot of young people have come from marginalized backgrounds, which tends to lead a person to have a very low self-esteem A lot of it's to do with confidence.' (Golding, 2000b: 52). In order to address this, another trainer, Rebecca, suggested that 'Future Connections gives them confidence ... The place is comfortable for them, it's welcoming, it's really friendly. And they feel that they can push themselves beyond those boundaries a little bit.' (Golding, 2000b:56). Summing up this and several other similar studies in the anthology, Falk, Golding and Ballatti confirm that the trust that community training groups can foster is 'a prerequisite for the self-confidence needed to risk reaching out into existing networks or creating new ones' (2000:96).

Where trainers were part of the same group as the trainees, this sense of identification also magnifies the effectiveness of their mentoring role. Rommes *et al* (2005) observe that where the trainers in women-only ICT groups are also women, from similar backgrounds to the trainees, they are able to advise and assist trainees particularly relevantly, both because they understand the challenges that the trainees face, and because the trainees believe their advice is relevant to their own lives. As one of the trainees in the study remarked about her conversations with her IT trainer: "I think she understood my situation and I felt she really knew me" (Rommes *et al*, 2005: 301).

This strongly supports the idea that a learning environment which fosters understanding for the learners' context, and identification with the others who are successful which makes the support accessible to them. Where the barriers of poor initial education, low socio-economic status, and low expectations are significant, personal support, encouragement and mentoring is particularly needed, and factors which make these more effective are likely to be extremely valuable. It is therefore not closure as such, but the norms which a close-knit network of strong ties supports, which allows people to benefit from relevant mentoring, and support. The commonalities in these success stories suggest that community groups provide resources which facilitate this, because they contain individuals who identify with one another, and often already have existing relationships.

Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) provide an insight into the mechanism whereby closely knit groups are able to provide the support documented in the cases. Looking closely at how the individual level of interaction contributes to the society-level phenomenon that we refer to as social capital, they show through close conversation analysis, that inter-personal interactions rely on and produce resources connected to both knowledge and identity. For knowledge resources, people who know what another person knows are better able to get that knowledge from them, increasing the pool of knowledge. Likewise, interactions 'draw on internal and external resources of common understandings related to personal, individual and collective identities' and in turn 'build a sense of belonging and encourage participation, as well as providing the framework for people to re-orientate their views of themselves and others.' (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000:100). In other words, Falk and Kirkpatrick identify a mechanism whereby the interactions that form 'bonding ties' actually provide the resources of support, encouragement and role-modelling that have been identified as important to the success of these groups.

5. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN FINDING EMPLOYMENT

The potential that these bonding ties have to create community resources which can be used to enhance vocational training is particularly important because it provides a counterbalance to much other research on what is variously called social capital, group effects, and neighbourhood effects in disadvantaged communities. This research, which focuses on individuals' social resources, suggests that both gaining skills and finding employment are, in general, negatively affected by membership of a disadvantaged group.

In terms of receiving training, Fischer and Kmec (2004) find that low socio-economic status neighbourhoods decrease the ability of parents to convert their own human capital into positive education outcomes for their children. Likewise, in a sample of African American students from six San Francisco schools, Dornbusch, Ritter and Steinberg (1991) find that living in neighbourhoods with large proportions (over 30%) of African Americans reduced the impact of advantages such as income and the education of parents on educational outcomes. The mechanisms for these effects range from lower availability of supportive institutions (such as churches, youth groups etc) to lower levels of monitoring in the community (Fischer and Kmec, 2004).

In terms of facilitating the entry of individuals from disadvantaged groups into the workplace, the literature has shown that the structure of social ties is significant, and that bridging ties, which give

individuals access to networks outside their own, give individuals better job prospects by increasing access to information.

This literature is fairly well-developed. Granovetter (1973) shows how weak ties which link individuals to others outside their networks generate opportunities, including job opportunities. De Graaf and Flap (1988) find that greater social resources lead to higher prestige jobs. Beggs and Hurlbert (1998) find that the effect of social ties on job-seeking is gendered, and women have access to fewer and less valuable information-giving social ties. Marsden and Hurlbert (1988) replicate and confirm studies by Lin, Ensel and Vaughan (1981) and Bridges and Villemez (1986), which find that social resources which provide access to valuable job information is linked to higher occupational status and higher income, respectively.

In their survey of this literature, Ioannides and Loury (2004) reflect that not only is there an international and well-established consensus that social networks affect job opportunities, but there is also strong evidence that there are group differences in both the ability to use these networks and the usefulness of the networks themselves. There are also a number of studies which show that these group differences affect average group wages and influence the levels of inequality. For example, Topa (2001) shows that unemployment displays neighbourhood effects: individuals are more likely to be unemployed if the unemployment in their area is higher. He also shows that this effect is larger for ethnic minorities and less educated workers.

A particularly important point to emerge from this literature is that inequality in social capital, and particularly in the social capital constituted by bridging ties, can cause entrenched group inequality. Lin (2000) shows that where certain groups (gender, racial or ethnic) experience higher levels of social disadvantage, and where these groups also tend to associate with those that are similar to them in the relevant respect (a phenomenon referred to as homophily), then this reduces both the heterogeneity and the quality of the social resources available to them. This in turn affects their access to and success within the labour market, and therefore increases the chances that a member of that group will be socially disadvantaged. In other words, 'cross-group ties facilitate access to better resources and better outcomes for members of the disadvantaged group', but 'homophily and structural constraints reduce the likelihood of establishing such ties for most of the disadvantaged members' (Lin, 2000:787). The result of this is that individuals in resource-poor networks, although they share information and influence, have, on average, less useful information and influence to share, and therefore remain resource-poor, perpetuating the social disadvantage of the group.

This perspective illustrates the extent to which social capital factors contribute to the challenge that individuals from disadvantaged groups face in gaining access to jobs that reflect the range of opportunities available in society. While acknowledging the importance of these bridging ties, this paper suggests that if it is true that the bonding social capital within civil society organisations can be successfully mobilised in order to support the training process and equip individuals with skills that are relevant to the work place, this would be an important way of using resources that groups may have, even if they lack other types of social capital, thereby helping the individuals within them to overcome some of the boundaries to employment. A focus on the nature and structure of ties of within groups such as women's groups and faith-based groups is therefore an important complement to studies which examine the effects of social capital within defined social groups.

6. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ADVANTAGES OF COMMUNITY GROUPS PROVISION INTERNATIONALLY

Finally, there is reason to believe that not only do civil society groups have an advantage in providing vocational education, but also that these advantages put them in a position to address certain vocational training challenges that have international relevance. In a recent study of attitudes and perceptions among employers and vocational training practitioners in nine countries across the world, Gosling & Shoesmith (2008) identified a number of key challenges in vocational education and training at present, and it is interesting that the social capital advantages outlined above address some of these issues.

The study found that both employers and practitioners across the nine countries believe that soft skills are not sufficiently provided by traditional training, but that these are very necessary for employability. Employers were asked how acceptable they find the quality of their employees' soft skills. Responses were given on a scale of 1 to 10 where '1' equated to "not at all acceptable", and '10' to "completely acceptable". Internationally, the mean was 4.99, indicating a serious shortfall in this type of skill (Gosling & Shoesmith, 2008:63), and in India and Canada, the shortfall in soft skills was perceived to be as large or larger than basic, generic or technical skills. These findings were replicated in the qualitative component of the study (Gosling & Shoesmith, 2008:164). If civil society groups have the advantages that the studies above suggest, they are likely to be particularly well placed to cultivate this type of skill. Specifically, teamwork and communication can be transferred far more effectively in the context of closer ties, where trust is higher, and barriers of suspicion, defensiveness and shyness are likely to be lower.

Additionally, the study found that pathways to work were important. (Gosling & Shoesmith, 2008:170). As this paper has shown, targeted guidance is one of the functions that civil society networks provide well, which is particularly important in groups where diverse bridging ties are less available. In other words, it seems that the some of the advantages of this method of delivery address issues that both employers and trainers around the world think are important.

7. CONCLUSION

By examining the positive externalities that community groups can generate for vocational training within that group, this paper has shown that the social capital features that which support skills training are a function of the bonding ties within groups, as opposed to bridging ties, which play an important role in job search. Ties within community groups may therefore play as important a role in economic integration as ties which bridge communities.

As noted above, the implication of this argument is not that individuals should be educated in their existing groups. Instead, the point is that one cannot get away from the importance of community groups in shaping the way that individuals interact with the broader community. Their effect in mediating the education process should not be overlooked, and it is useful to understand this effect so that the resources of such groups can be positively tapped. Whether they are pre-formed, or emerge out of learning institutions, these groups have the potential to be important launching pads, especially for those who face extra challenges in integration, and understanding the nature of the support they can give is the first step towards accessing it.

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ⁱ Only women who showed the aptitude and determination to complete the course were chosen.