Social capital, social work and young lives

The purpose of our article is to explore the concept of social capital in the contexts of childhood and adolescence by concentrating on issues dealing with children’s and adolescents’ well-being and on the way in which social capital is seen to promote well-being and prevent mal-being. By reviewing academic articles studying social capital with children or adolescents as their research subjects, we aim to form a general view of how social capital is seen in the studies of childhood and youth. What are the sources of social capital in early ages, how is social capital seen to manifest itself in practice, and what are the effects of social capital like? In addition, we ask what social work can gain from knowing and acknowledging the contents of social capital in childhood and adolescence.

Keywords:
Children
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Well being
Introduction

The well-being of children and adolescents is constructed at many operational levels. It is built up in macro-level environments – in municipal, societal and global arenas – as well as in immediate surroundings tightly bound with everyday life, such as family, friends and school. Along with financial and human capital, the recent academic debate has underlined the significance of the social capital potentially located in these micro, meso and macro-level communities. Social capital has been seen as a precondition for the healthy social and cognitive development of children and adolescents (e.g. Coleman 1988; 1990; Putnam 2000) and, through the concept of social capital, many interesting research findings have been suggested about the correlation between children’s and adolescents’ social processes and behaviour (e.g. Cartland et al. 2003; Anguiano 2004; Goodwin & Armstrong-Esther 2004). In the field of social work that aims at the well-being of children and adolescents, the concept of social capital often comes across at the policy level. In Finland, the concept has been used to justify several policy initiatives concerning children and youth and to achieve their objectives (e.g. Mustonen & Pulkkinen 2003). However, the comprehensive definitions of social capital are all too seldom included on the agenda.

Social work research has also started to develop an interest in social capital, although it often faces conceptual problems. It has been argued that the concept of social capital does not suit or is not helpful in social work theory or practice because of its all-embracing and amoebic nature and the ambiguity of the theorizations concerning it. On the other hand, ‘social capital’ has been seen as a useful tool in explicating the connections between social relations and community resources and in identifying the meaning and importance of trust in social relationships. (Nysaether 2004.) The request for ‘social capital’ has also been acknowledged in social work practice, where the concept has mostly been adopted to the use of structural, ecological or community social work as something to aim for at the levels of both civil society and local communities (Sherraden & Ninacs 1998; Boeck et al. 2001; Pehkonen 2005). The aspiration for social capital has also been seen as something that connects the actors in the third sector and in formal social work (Sherraden & Ninacs 1998; Matthies et al. 2001; Ovaska 2003; see also Yeung 2004). However, many traditional fields of social work, such as care of the elderly and disabled as well as child welfare and protection, have only marginally encountered the social capital discussion (see e.g. Zechner 2007).

Children, social work and traditional theories of social capital

Despite its popularity, there exists no generally accepted definition of social capital. The debate on its origins, characteristics and effects has been varied. (See Portes 1998; Stolle & Hooghe 2003.) However, in the background to the diverging theories and
research practices lies a convergent understanding that social capital is somehow attached to social networks, norms and trust. Most often social capital is understood as a social resource that accumulates through interpersonal formal and informal relationships. (ONS 2001; Harper & Kelly 2003.)

In social work research, the roots of the social capital concept can be traced back to Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Putnam, and James Coleman. Most widely accepted and utilized seems to be Bourdieu’s theorization of capitals (e.g. Zambrana & Zoppi 2002; Emirbaye & Williams 2005; Kiili 2006). His theoretical starting point lies in the division of society: in addition to financial and cultural capital, social capital functions as a resource for maintaining inequalities. Communities are retained by symbolic means, and the identification and control of those means is a prerequisite for the use and accumulation of social capital. For Bourdieu, social capital is thus an individual attribute linked with group membership. (Bourdieu 1986, 248–252.)

Despite being widely used, Bourdieu’s social capital theory has been criticized for being elitist and detached from everyday life as well as for not perceiving children or adolescents as particular (Morrow 1999; cf. Lehtinen & Vuorisalo 2007). The same goes for a theory developed by Putnam (1993; 2000), according to whom social capital has formed along with historically developed social practices and manifests itself in active participation in various networking associations, interest in local issues and in participation in societal discussion. This kind of approach seems to be embraced mostly in North American social work research (e.g. Brisson & Usher 2007; Mathbor 2007), which follows Putnam by stating that the central elements in social capital are civic virtues, civic activity and community infrastructure. Because of their age, however, children and adolescents fall outside the democratic civic system, thus remaining in a detached position in Putnam’s theory. Neither does the central concept of generalized trust, used by Putnam and his followers, unambiguously fit children’s and young people’s lives. The way in which children and adolescents experience trust is first and foremost linked with close social relationships, not so much with public institutions or societal systems. (Morrow 1999.)

Generally the concept of social capital has been linked to children and adolescents through Coleman’s work (1988; 1990) rather than Putnam’s or Bourdieu’s. This also holds true in social work research (Ferguson 2005; Kääriäinen et al. 2005; Kao & Rutherford 2007), although the social work research done from the viewpoint of children’s social capital remain rare. In Coleman’s definition, the structural elements and functionality of social capital are essential. The effects of social capital as well as its form and amount as a resource vary depending on the characteristics of community social structure. According to Coleman, only the network that is able to create and maintain norms produces social capital. In the forming of social networks, it is important that the members of the community know, trust, and control each other. He calls this kind of functionality of social relationships closure. Of particular importance, in
his view, is *intergenerational closure*, which is created when parents of children know the parents of their children’s friends, forming a close social network. This closure generates and maintains norms, thus creating a favourable environment for children to grow in. (Coleman 1988.)

Although Coleman is widely cited in social capital studies, his work can also be criticized, particularly in relation to children and adolescents. Coleman has sought to provide a very general definition of the concept of social capital, without taking the diversity of society into account. Children and adolescents, however, cannot be regarded as a homogenous group; differences in gender, age and cultural background have an effect on how a child perceives the world (Morrow 1999). Lea Pulkkinen (2002) has sought to emphasize these basic differences between the social capitals of individual children by employing the concept of *initial social capital*. According to Pulkkinen, initial social capital consists of the values, norms and supportive social networks that small children are inherently provided with by the environment in which they were born. Initial social capital can later increase and accumulate as a result of both active upbringing and a passive environmental effect. (Ibid., 44.)

As a whole, the definitions of social capital by Coleman, Putnam and Bourdieu seem to be constructed from an adult-centred perspective, in which children and adolescents with their views and experiences have been more or less marginalized. This is not surprising considering the aims and focuses of these theorists: to Coleman, social capital has mostly to do with components of structural networks; to Putnam, with institutions and trust at societal level; and, to Bourdieu, with the elite’s networks. Thus, the straightforward application of ‘social capital’ in policy and in practice can be seen as problematic from children’s and young people’s points of view. Can empirical studies, then, be helpful in resolving social capital? In the following review, we try to untangle how social capital is expressed in academic studies on children and adolescents. After that, we puzzle over the usefulness of ‘social capital’ in social work concerning children and the young.

The literature on children and social capital

For the review, an extensive literature search was performed through several international academic databases (Ebsco Host, Science Direct, CSA, JStor and Academic Search Elite) as well as the Finnish library databases for books and articles. ‘Social capital’ and children (child*/school aged) and/or adolescents (youth*/young people/young adult/adolescent*) were used as search words. Therefore, articles that employed sister concepts of social capital (e.g. cultural or symbolic capital) are missing from the review, as well as articles referring to children and adolescents by using different terms. The original review was performed in 2004 and consisted of 31 empirical articles (see Ellonen & Korkiamäki 2006). It must be acknowledged that since then a lot has been written about children and social capital. In this article, some of the more recent stud-
ies are also taken into account. Updating our thorough search in 2008 could have produced a more diverse picture of social capital with, for example, more qualitative research on the issue. Still, it is likely that the basic results about the contents of social capital would not be very different (cf. Leonard 2005; Ferguson 2006; Rantalaiho & Teige 2006; Holland et al. 2007; Lehtinen & Vuorisalo 2007). The articles were analysed systematically (for a systematic literature review, see e.g. Ferguson 2006), looking for sources, manifestations and effects of social capital. The analysis was focused on the empirical parts of the articles, leaving theoretic backgrounds and discussions aside. This was done for the purpose of studying what social capital means, above all, at the level of research practices.

Based on the reviewed articles, social capital seems to be located in the field of childhood and youth in diverse ways. Among the most common studies are the ones referring to the concept mostly to justify the research question or to explain the research theme (e.g. Coren 2004; Thorson & Beaudoin 2004). Fairly common are also studies in which the concept of social capital plays a central role, but which only loosely touch on the thematics of childhood or youth (e.g. Hughes & Stone 2003). Many of the studies look at children and adolescents as representative members of social institutions, such as families, not as research subjects on their own (e.g. Korbin & Coulton 1996; Kilpatrick et al. 2003). The few studies in which children and adolescents are clearly in the position of research subjects are mostly North American, which has resulted in the domination of Coleman- and Putnam-inspired studies. Many of the European texts deriving from Bourdieu’s theory are missing from the social capital discussion, perhaps because of their tendency to favour the concepts of cultural or symbolic capital over social capital. To Bourdieu, children’s socialization into a community is not involved in the concept of social capital; instead, it has more to do with cultural and symbolic practices. The decision to restrict the exploration only to ‘social capital’ can be seen as a limitation of this article, as the “more Bourdieutic studies” would have probably produced a more lively and dynamic picture of social capital.

In studies of children’s and adolescents’ social capital the perspectives of health, education and psychiatry are well represented. Instead, social work researchers interested in childhood and youth have not been inspired by social capital, although a few theoretically oriented reviews and analyses have been written on children and social capital from the point of view of social work (see Forssén ym. 2002; Ellonen & Korkiamäki 2006; Ferguson 2006; Holland 2007). The empirical studies are rare. Drukker et al. (2003), however, consider the possibilities of local social work in improving the socioeconomic conditions of a neighbourhood, which is seen to build the social capital of local families and children. Also, the role of social work has been considered in strengthening school and community social capital to improve minority students’ academic achievements (Zambrana & Zoppi 2002; Kao & Rutherford 2007) and to control Mexican children’s movements into the streets to work (Ferguson 2005). In the
Nordic countries, social capital seems to be an emerging focus in research on children and adolescents (Rantalaiho & Teige 2006, 53-55; see e.g. Berntsson et al. 2006), but not many publications are yet available under the category of social work. In Finland, however, where research on social capital is exceptionally extensive compared to the other Nordic countries (Rantalaiho & Teige 2006, 55), Kääriäinen et al. (2005) look at schools and neighbourhoods to find out whether these have social capital that could prevent psychosocial problems among adolescents. Kiili (2006) discovers elements of social capital that define children’s participatory practices at school and in residential areas, and Ellonen (2008) studies the relationships between community social capital and adolescents’ depressive and delinquent behaviour. Naturally, there might be several social work studies on children and young people that investigate the elements of social capital, but that do not deliberately apply the concept.

Where does social capital of children and adolescents emerge?

In the reviewed studies, the origin of social capital is unanimously linked to social networks. The most discussed theme is family, consisting of parents and siblings and often excluding extended family members. The quality of interaction between children and parents, the time and energy that parents invest in their children, as well as the norms that socialize into “right” and “wrong” have been seen as factors constituting social capital in families (Hagan et al. 1995; Caspi et al. 1998). The social relationships between siblings are not commented on (cf. Edwards 2006) but, instead, the number of siblings is taken into account as a factor in social capital (Runyan et al. 1998; Djamba 2002). This decision is based on Coleman’s (1988, 111) statement that a large number of siblings decreases the amount of parental control over children and thus diminishes social capital3. Following Coleman’s work, other structural characteristics like the form of the family (two-parent family), a good financial situation and highly qualified parents have also been considered as the provenance of social capital (Runyan et al. 1998; Morgan & Sorensen 1999).

School is often seen as an environment where social capital is formed and created. Sometimes social capital is looked at as a straightforward outcome of being a student at a certain school (Teachman & Paasch 1997). More often school is seen as a holistic community in which interaction between teachers and students, between teachers and parents as well as among parents is important. Broad co-operation between the various parties is said to provide for the emergence of a shared set of social norms, which is necessary for social capital to occur. (Morgan & Sorensen 1999; Croninger & Lee 2001). The school community is also seen to produce social capital for the use of other systems, such as family (Anguiano 2004). On the other hand, interaction among students is left quite unexamined in the academic social capital debate (cf. Cartland et al. 2003).
The concept of social capital is often linked to geographically defined communities, of which *neighbourhood* in particular is considered significant. Various organizations and activities in the neighbourhood are seen as the centre of social capital formation. Sports clubs, parental activities and joint recreational events mediate the values and norms prevailing in the neighbourhood. Social capital is seen to emerge in the socialization process in which children absorb the values and practices considered desirable in the community. (Ainsworth 2002; Crowder & South 2003.) Also, participation in the *associations and organizations* outside the immediate residential environment has been seen as a source of social capital (Croninger & Lee 2001).

*The peer relations* and friendships of children and adolescents as sources of social capital have been rarely explored. This is rather surprising considering the great significance of various groups of friends and peers from the standpoint of children’s well-being (see e.g. Cotterell 1996). McCarthy and Hagan (1995) and Stephenson (2001), however, have studied the peer networks of homeless children and adolescents living on the streets, stating that, in street communities, children and adolescents actively seek to produce social capital through the practices of social support, trust and collective norms control. Protective, although often criminal, practices seem to produce the kind of support and training, "criminal capital", that adolescents need to cope on the street (McCarthy & Hagan 1995).

**How does social capital of children and adolescents manifest itself?**

The social capital springing from the existence of social interdependencies shows as most diverse practices of human interaction. When defining the measuring of social capital, the researchers also produce practical contents for social capital. For example, following Coleman, the frequently measured *structural factors* such as parents’ education (Hagan et al. 1995) or their socio-economic position (Morgan & Sorensen 1999) are often seen as features by which the social capital of children or adolescents can be identified. Sometimes structural characteristics have even been used as a benchmark for social capital on their own. Besides family structure, how long children have lived in their neighbourhood (Crowder & South 2003) and how often they have moved from one school to another (Teachman & Paasch 1997) have been seen as indicators describing social capital.

*The attitudinal aspects* of social capital, such as the atmosphere prevailing in school and at home (Parcel & Dufur 2001), as well as values, attitudes and appreciations (McCarthy & Hagan 1995), are studied less than structural features. Even trust as experienced by children or adolescents has hardly been studied – despite the fact that the concept of trust has become one of the most often utilized terms in social capital discussion (cf. McCarthy & Hagan 1995; Drukker et al. 2003). Senses of security and solidarity, however, have been seen to tell us about children’s social capital formation.
Often-studied social support, social control and participation can be seen as the functional features of social capital. Among these, social support appears as the most studied practice of social capital, and the forms of support seem to be multifarious. Support may appear as getting information or advice from neighbours (Harpham et al. 2004), or having parents participate in school activities and expressing parental fondness and encouragement in other ways (Furstenberg & Hughes 1995; Anguiano 2004). Also, children’s will to discuss with their parents and their interest in spending time with their families are seen as indications of social support and thus, of social capital (Barber 2001). More often, however, children and adolescents are displayed as one-sided recipients of social support provided by their parents, teachers and adults in the neighbourhood (e.g. Caspi et al. 1998; Morgan & Sorensen 1999; Croninger & Lee 2001).

Social control seems to be exerted on children mainly by their parents and teachers. Most typically social control is measured by asking how well the parents know their children’s friends (Furstenberg & Hughes 1995; Morgan & Sorensen 1999) or whether the parents know what their children are “really” doing (Barber 2001; Parcel & Dufur 2001). A healthy sign of well-functioning social control is also seen to be the parents’ acquaintance with the parents of their children’s friends (Morgan & Sorensen 1999; Ainsworth 2002). Instead, insufficient social control and lack of social capital can be identified, if adolescents are able to meet their friends after eight in the evening or stay overnight at their friends’ houses without parental consent (Hagan et al. 1995). Also, the significance of neighbourhood in maintaining social control has been taken into account; for example, adults’ readiness to correct the behaviour of children other than their own is said to reflect the informal social control exerted by neighbourhood (Drukker et al. 2003; O’Brien Caughey et al. 2003).

Participation as a feature of children’s and adolescents’ social capital is approached from three angles in social capital discussion. First, participation is referred to as parental participation in the activities of the surrounding community, such as active church affiliation or parental advocacy at school level (Furstenberg & Hughes 1995; Anguiano 2004). Second, involvement in peer networks that function as sources of social capital is taken into account in a few studies (McCarthy & Hagan 1995; Stephenson 2001). Third, and most commonly, participation is seen as civic involvement. Morrow (2000), for example, has studied the possibilities of children and adolescents having a say in their neighbourhood and Kiili (2006) at the school setting. Adolescents’ participation in various marches and demonstrations, or voluntary work, as well as in resolving community problems in co-operation with their neighbours, has also been considered as an indication of social capital (Ravanera et al. 2003; Harpham et al. 2004).
What are the effects of social capital on children and adolescents?

Social capital, or the lack of it, seems to have an unquestionable effect on the well-being of children and adolescents. Most often, social capital is seen to prevent or decrease the occurrences held harmful from the viewpoint of children’s and adolescents’ well-being, such as dropping out of school (Crowder & South 2003), unemployment (Caspi et al. 1998), or mental health problems (Harpham et al. 2004). Nevertheless, social capital has also been seen to have a positive effect on children’s favourable growth, development and overall well-being, in particular in groups at risk (see Furstenberg & Hughes 1995; Runyan et al. 1998).

Both improvement in academic achievement – grades in most central school subjects – and decrease in dropping out of school have been seen to result from children's social capital. According to Sun and Li (2001), family social capital alleviates marital disruption and the detrimental effects of other negative life situations on academic achievement. Social capital has also been said to advance school performance through buffering the effects of neighbourhood disadvantage. Those having lived long in the same neighbourhood are part of the social networks and institutions that construct social capital, which decreases the school drop-out rate as well as advances academic achievement. (Ainsworth 2002; Crowder and South 2003.)

According to Coleman (1988; 1990), privately owned Catholic schools in the USA benefit from larger endowments of social capital by generating dense network connections among students’ parents (intergenerational closure). Morgan and Sorensen (1999) do not corroborate Coleman’s claim; instead, they argue that the density of student friendship networks seems to increase academic achievement (Ibid). Also teacher support and co-operation between teachers and parents all have a positive effect on school performance. For example, students who feel they receive support and guidance and who trust their teachers will more likely complete high school. This is especially true for socially-at-risk students who enter high school with low educational expectations and a history of school-related problems. (Croninger & Lee 2001.) However, the connection of social capital to adolescents’ dropping out of school or their academic achievement should not be taken too literally: the effects often occur as a complex whole (Teachman & Paasch 1997).

In addition to school performance, school social capital has an effect on delinquent behaviour, particularly through school atmosphere. In the school environment, a key component seems to be hospitality, the level of which – indicating the amount of social capital – is negatively associated with aggressive behaviour and the number of substances used as well as with negative conflict resolution tactics among the students (Cartland et al. 2003). Also family social capital – measured by time spent with parents, commitment to family, and parents’ attitudes towards crime – prevents criminal behaviour (Barber 2001; Cartland et al. 2003).
Where family and school social capital seem to decrease juvenile delinquency, peer groups of children and adolescents have mainly been seen as accumulators of negative behaviour. Barber’s (2001) study of adolescents’ Intifada experiences demonstrates that social integration into family and school is unrelated to illegal actions, and a study of right-wing extremism among Berlin youth suggests that weakness of informal social control and anomic aspirations lead to extremist and criminal involvement through a delinquent drift (Hagan et al. 1995). McCarthy and Hagan (1995) state that adverse experiences such as street life lead to embeddedness in criminal street networks and exposure to mentors who transmit skills that constitute forms of criminal capital and facilitate involvement in crime. On the other hand, as stated earlier, by networking and learning criminal skills – generating social capital – homeless adolescents manage on the streets (Ibid; Stephenson 2001).

Social capital in neighbourhoods has been observed to affect children’s and adolescents’ general health, mental health, self-esteem and behaviour as well as health-related quality of life. Drukker et al. (2003) suggest that social capital improves quality of life through community resources that encourage people to live healthier lives. In O’Brien Caughy’s study, children whose parents reported knowing few of their neighbours in wealthy neighbourhoods had higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to those who knew many of their neighbours. In contrast, in poor neighbourhoods, children whose parents reported knowing few of their neighbours had lower levels of internalizing problems compared to those who knew many of their neighbours. (O’Brien Caughy et al. 2003.) Therefore, paying attention to children’s connections to community and neighbourhood would, according to Morrow (2000), better the quality of their lives and decrease health inequalities.

From the perspective of social integration, results concerning the effects of social capital have been diversiform depending on the way in which social capital has been measured and in which integration is understood. Parents’ marital status, for example, is said to have an effect on having a job or attending school, but not on participation or belonging (Ravanera et al. 2003). At the aggregate level, community characteristics have a greater impact on the sense of belonging than on inclusion and participation (Ibid; Caspi et al. 1998). Social integration, however, should not be looked at only from the perspective of societal socialization, but also as social attachment to local and immediate peer communities (see McCarthy & Hagan 1995; Stephenson 2001).

Conclusion and discussion

Based on our review of academic articles, the social capital of children and adolescents presents itself as unambiguous, on the one hand, and as diversiform on the other. Unanimity shows in the simplicity of the communities under examination. The studies focus primarily on families, schools and neighbourhoods and brush aside many changing and flexible community characteristics affecting children’s and adolescents’
Diversity in turn comes to the fore when operationalizations of social capital are looked at. In addition to the structural characteristics of families, neighbourhoods and social networks, social capital seems to consist of senses of security and belonging as well as of good atmosphere in school and at home. The various practices of social capital are manifested in the support that adults give to children, in co-operation between school and home, or in well-functioning child–parent relationships. In addition, social capital is expressed through control exerted on children by parents, teachers and adult neighbours as well as through active participation by parents and children themselves. A critical orientation could sum up that almost any positive person-to-person interaction falls into the category of social capital.

The effects of social capital are most often studied from a problem-based perspective, and social capital is seen as a positive alleviator of these problems. Often the interpretations of the effects of social capital are dubiously wide, and the relationship between causes and consequences get mingled. On the other hand, many studies emphasize the diversity of the effects. The various components of social capital may be differently linked to particular outcomes, and the different types and sources of social capital should be taken into account in studying relations between social capital and its effects (Furstenberg & Hughes 1995).

In its diverse and fitting-to-all nature, social capital is also a tempting concept for actors in social work. Social capital is easy grounds: it is widely agreed that networks, trust and community benefit our well-being (Ruuskanen 2002). Also, turning social relationships into the language of economics – i.e. capital – can make these more appealing to politicians, bureaucrats and decision-makers. But applying the concept in practice without thinking its contents through can be risky: What are the promises of applying ‘social capital’? What kind of practices should we encourage or discourage in the name of social capital? How can the results be measured if we do not know what we are aiming for? Studying the origins, means and consequences of social capital can increase our understanding and help us develop more individualized projects, practices and approaches, with or without involving the concept of social capital on our agenda.

Studying social capital is not, however, only about reviewing the pre-written texts on social capital, but about critical thinking and reflection as well. In Figure 1, we sum up the findings of our review as well as the critique ensuing from the review. Both the findings and the critique have implications for social work and for other practices where questions concerning children’s and adolescents’ well-being are addressed.
Our review of social capital in early ages produced four critical points to consider.

First of all, children and adolescents as active actors (see e.g. Alanen 1992; James & Prout 1997; Cieslik & Pollock 2002) get very little attention in social capital research. Children and adolescents are mostly presented as targets of supportive or controlling actions carried out by adults. However, as clients and co-actors in social work, childcare and youth work practices, children and young people cannot be seen as passive bystanders in their own lives, but as active users and builders of social capital of
their own and of their surroundings (cf. Morrow 1999). Working with children and respecting their expertise would help to recognize the forms of social capital that are meaningful from a child’s point of view.

Also, in the social capital debate, peer groups of children and the young have gained surprisingly little attention. In its often functional and normative interpretations, social capital is preferably attached to socialization institutions like school and family. In addition, age and gender that are likely to define children’s and adolescents’ mutual relationships remain nearly untouched (Morrow 1999). However, relationships with peers, often the most important social relationships in adolescence, could be looked at as communities of social support, control and inclusive practices. Thus, the practices that build social capital among children and young people could be noted and nourished through, for example, group activities in child protection (see Pekkarinen 2007).

Social relationships among children and adolescents are often highly describable by informality and context-boundness (Morrow 2000). According to Panelli (2002, 114), children and young people cannot be fully understood without observing the changing contexts that surround and shape their experiences. In the social capital debate, the concept of community is typically – and physically – limited to neighbourhood and does not therefore confront the multiple and various relationships in which children engage. In social work practice, this signifies the importance of knowing and understanding the diverse and mobile communities where children experience the feeling of belonging – whether at home, in school, on the playground or on the Internet (Korkiamäki 2008). Instead of building new community relationships, it could often be useful to identify children’s “natural” networks, e.g. friendships, to reinforce and reassign the social capital of these already existing groupings.

Finally, the effects of social capital were seen as something positive in the reviewed articles. The effects of social relationships can, however, be both positive and negative, at least in the outsider’s eyes (Portes 1998; Nylund 2004, 189). Smoking, drinking and anti-school or anti-work related practices are often justified through community social capital such as support, control, trust and reciprocity prevailing among community members (Goodwin & Armstrong-Esther 2004). Also, social capital can be seen as a means of exclusion; a community defines its borders through a culturally shared understanding of symbolic meanings – the tighter the community, the stricter the barriers – and thus allows some people to be included in community resources, while shutting others out. Depending on the context and on the viewpoint, social capital can be seen either as a resource for well-being or as a constraint on social mobility. It can be seen as the task of social work to acknowledge the risks of tightly bonding social capital and to intervene when social capital becomes a threat to a child’s well-being.

The criticism of social capital research can be considered relevant from the viewpoint of social work practice and policy. If children are not looked at as competent
actors or if their peer communities are not taken seriously, the programmes that aim at or are based on social capital remain trivial. The potentiality and restrictions lying in children’s multifarious communities should be taken into account when children’s and adolescents’ well-being is pursued. Social capital should be looked at in societal and cultural contexts, not as a single factor detached from its surroundings. Diversity of social relationships is central: not only parents, but also school, free time activities, and friends in particular are important sources of social capital. However salient it is to look at these sources separately, they should also be approached as inseparable parts of the whole in children’s living environments.

Despite the challenges, social work done among children and young people can profit from ‘social capital’ in its determinacy of not allowing the local social connections important to children and adolescents to be brushed aside. Collaborating with children in recognizing and utilizing the social capital residing in their local communities can be seen as the task and goal of social work aiming at children’s and adolescents’ well-being. Also, where the practices of social work and child protection are often problem-centred and reconstructive, the notion of social capital brings with it a way of thinking that focuses more on existing resources and preventive measures. Even communities often seen as harmful or dysfunctional, for example families that suffer from problems caused by a parent’s mental illness or peer groups that support substance abuse, may bear a tremendous amount of support, solidarity and togetherness. Only the practices towards which this social capital is directed at may be “wrong” or missing. Taking into account the presented criticism and its implications as well as the research-driven explanations of the sources, manifestations and effects of social capital would ensure that the aspects of social capital are taken into consideration in social work practices with children and young people. The role of social work could be seen more consciously as that of building, activating and maintaining social capital in communities already present in children’s and young people’s everyday lives. In this way, social capital can be a source of good community practices and the well-being of children and the young.

Endnotes
1 This article was written as a part of the research project Local community and school as sources of trust and social support of adolescents (207367) under the Social Capital and Trust Research Programme of the Academy of Finland (2004-2007). An earlier version of the article has been published in Finnish (Sosiaalinen pääoma lasten ja nuorten hyvinvoinnin resurssina Analyysi sosiaalinen pääoma -käsitteen käytöstä kansainvälisessä lapsuus- ja nuorisotutkimuksessa) in Forsberg, Hannele & Törrönen, Maritta & Ritala-Koskinen, Aino (eds.) Lapset ja sosiaalityö (Jyväskylä, PS-kustannus, pp. 221–249).
2 According to Putnam (1993), civic activity produces the kind of social capital that after being established is manifested in generalized trust that assembles society as a whole. According to this view, trust in public or third sector actors reflects the social capital prevailing in a community.
3 This view can be criticized from the viewpoint of peer group social capital. Although parental control might decrease as the number of siblings increases, the interactive practices among brothers and sisters are often sources of support, control and other forms of social capital (see Edwards 2006).
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Summaries

**Félagsauður, félagsráðgjöf og ungur aldur**

**Sosiaalinen pääoma, sosiaalityö ja lasten ja nuorten elämä**

**Keywords:**
sosiaalinen pääoma, lapset, nuoret, sosiaalityö, hyvinvointi