

**Exploring New Zealand's Rural Education Activities Programmes (REAPs):
Social capital in a lifelong learning and community development context**

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Abstract

This research explored the extent to which social capital is an approach used by New Zealand's Rural Education Activities Programmes (REAPs) to contribute to rural education. Social capital was defined for the purposes of this study as the resource residing in networks of individuals, based on mutual trust and shared social norms, which can be brokered and mobilised to achieve social benefits, particularly in the application of knowledge and skills. A conceptual framework lays out four key elements from this definition which were investigated: networks, trust, social norms, and brokerage.

Given the lack of published material on REAPs and their work, a primarily qualitative design was utilised. Set within a constructivist epistemology and interpretive phenomenological methodology, in-depth interviews with REAP managers and questionnaires for REAP learners were used to collect data. The aim was to explore the lived experiences of these two REAP groups to identify their views on how REAPs operate so that those views could be considered within the social capital framework above. An inductive-deductive-inductive analysis approach was used to maximise the extent to which findings reflected participant language.

Findings from both REAP managers and learners supported the strong presence of the four social capital elements in REAP activity. In many cases the qualitative themes were closely related, both within and across the four social capital elements. Both strong (social) and weak (institutional) forms of trust were described as influencing learner participation in networks, where REAPs played a role in brokering that participation within similar (bonded) and differing (bridged) networks. REAPs made use of trusted relationships and valued-based decision making to gain local community and cultural knowledge to ensure the relevance of responsive learning activities. The result was enhanced confidence and identity of learners to take part in other social activities, including further learning and collective action.

Lived examples of these elements supported a social capital approach that fit well with the lifelong learning and community development processes outlined by the REAP mandate. These processes were defined holistically to consider the integration of individuals' beliefs, viewpoints, and behaviours as much as skills and knowledge. The explored social capital approach within lifelong learning and community development contexts, yields clear recommendations for Government, REAPs, and partner organisations. Flexibility, values/identity-based education, and closing network gaps to facilitate innovation come through as REAP social capital practices that could inform policy and partnerships across the whole of the education sector. Further research is needed to more closely consider the complex relationships of the identified social capital themes. In terms of emergent themes, a deeper exploration of innovation produced through brokerage within REAP activity is highlighted as a key area of research for future.

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