FOREWORD BY CLAYTON M. CHRISTENSEN JULIA FREELAND FISHER WITH DANIEL FISHER

Unlocking Innovations That Expand Students' Networks

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WHO YOU KNOW

Unlocking Innovations That Expand Students' Networks

JULIA FREELAND FISHER

FOREWORD BY CLAYTON M. CHRISTENSEN

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CONTENTS

Foreword		vii
Clayton M. Christensen		
Introduction		1
1	The Social Side of Opportunity: Why Relationships Matter to Meritocracy	17
2	Getting by with a Little Help from Our Friends: What Schools Need to Know about Social Capital	35
3	There's No App for That: The Power of Integrating Access to Strong Ties and Care	53
4	Edtech That Connects: How New Technologies Can Disrupt Students' Networks	69
5	Making Space for Relationships: Redesigning School as a Caring and Networking Hub	89
6	IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY CONNECT? ENGAGING OUTSIDERS	111

vi contents

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7 What Gets Measured Gets Done: School Metrics and Policies Reconsidered	133
Conclusion: Designing for a Networked Society, Labor Market, and Life	153
About the Authors	161
Acknowledgments	163
INDEX	167

FOREWORD Clayton M. Christensen

MANAGERS AND EXECUTIVES IN EVERY INDUSTRY HUNGER FOR GROWTH. GROWTH FOR THEIR employees, growth for their bottom lines, and growth for their customers as they improve products and services over time. For a school leader the quest is the same, though much more personal. How can we create an environment that helps our students grow and fulfill their unique and enormous potential?

For over twenty years, I have studied the puzzle of growth, trying to understand where it comes from and what happens to it. During that time the theory of disruptive innovation emerged, which asserts that massive growth opportunities are available by developing simple solutions for individuals who have historically not had access to existing offerings. As disruptive innovations improve over time, entire industries and sectors are transformed.

For the past ten years, we have been applying disruptive innovation theory to our schools, and concluded that online and blended learning stand to transform teaching and learning for every single student. And although this transformation serves to disrupt the forces influencing *what* our students know, Julia insightfully points out that there is perhaps an even more powerful disruptive opportunity in our schools—one that will dramatically impact *whom* our students know. This next wave of disruption has the potential to provide new and powerful relationships to millions of students who are left behind in our schools simply because of the limits of their surroundings.

For school leaders searching for new growth opportunities for their students, Julia's work is groundbreaking. All the academic interventions and supports in the world do little to change the opportunities contained in a child's inherited network—the collection of individuals in her home and community given to her at birth. Fortunately, tools and services are emerging that can change a child's fate by giving her a chance to interact and build relationships that expand her horizons, alter her perspectives, and generate opportunities. Like all disruptive innovations, these solutions are simple applications targeting simple problems. Over time, however, they stand to upend the ways students can access and capitalize on meaningful relationships.

I have gained so many marvelous insights from my time working with Julia and watching her lead this important work. A large part of my appreciation has come as I have reflected on the "strong ties" in my own life. Growing up on the wrong side of the tracks in Salt Lake City, I was fortunate to have been born to parents who had both attended college—an outright anomaly in my community. My mother wrote and spoke about politics and important issues in our home, and my father ran for the Utah state legislature despite his simple background as a grocery store manager. Together, my parents and community gave me a vision that I could be someone important in this world and have an impact—which is something every young person deserves, and every school should aim to deliver.

Over the past twenty years as an educator, manager, and father, I've realized that it's not professional accolades that will be the measure of my life. Instead, what will matter most is how I helped individual people become better. This book suggests a structure of school that would allow more individuals—even those that we don't think of as part of our traditional education system—to mentor, support, and inspire young people. In that vein, Julia's research and vision are indispensable to building a world in which individuals—even those from wildly different backgrounds—can help one another. I'm indebted to Julia for helping me see how disruptive innovation can play a part in providing diverse, meaningful, and enduring relationships for our students. Academic supports may last for a time, but the impact of relationships can bless a student's life forever. How can schools take advantage of this monumental opportunity? *Who You Know* points the way forward.



INTRODUCTION

WHO YOU KNOW MATTERS. WE CAN ALL THINK BACK TO A TIME WHEN A PERSONAL connection opened a new door to opportunity—or pushed us over the finish line. And we can all recall instances when somebody else, by virtue of his relationships, came out ahead of us.

Put simply, oftentimes opportunity is social. Social ties inherently shape our man-made systems. Whom you know turns out to matter across all sorts of industries and institutions: it matters if you're an entrepreneur trying to raise capital, an investor choosing among stocks, a patient seeking out health care, or a graduate in search of a job.¹ In fact, over *half* of all job placements result from a personal connection.²

But even with so much success hinging on our connections, one of our most central institutions almost entirely ignores the question of whom we know: our schools.

This is not to say that schools are by any means *anti*social environments. Seminal architects of our American education system such as John Dewey imagined modern education as a fundamentally social endeavor. Dewey believed that each school ought to function as an "embryonic community life." He insisted that schools should train children how to behave in society by inducting them into a "little community" of their peers.

Dewey's vision resonates with much of society's concept of what makes school, school. Today, parents rank acquiring social and communication skills among their top priorities for their children, next to study habits, critical thinking, and college preparation.³

But Dewey envisioned a *little*—even *embryonic*—school community. Which is exactly, by and large, what our schools have become. At best, schools today function as highly self-contained communities that may manage—between teaching skills and content and doing their best to ensure that students are safe and cared for—to impart social norms in their students. The implicit hope, then, is that by appropriately socializing children at a young age, schools prepare them to eventually hatch into the real world ready to interact.

As a result, by their very design, schools limit their students' access to people beyond their embryonic community. They are not built to nurture the health of their students' networks or to connect students in predictable and effective ways beyond their immediate constellation of teachers, family, and peers. With an eye toward socialization and establishing a tight-knit community, we have turned schools inside, rather than out.

In turn, many students leave school with a network that resembles the one they inherited at birth. Students who go on to college may buck this trend if they manage to attend an institution that connects them with new peers, professors, and alumni career networks. However, a large proportion of low-income students who could benefit *most* from these new connections never make it to college, and a large percentage of those who do attend fail to graduate.

Ignoring whom students know should be cause for concern for anyone working to close widening opportunity gaps. Relationships help young people get by and get ahead. Networks offer academic, emotional, and financial supports, as well as critical information and endorsements that open doors to new interests, opportunities, and even careers.

Take the great John Dewey himself: like many of today's millennials, after graduating college Dewey spent the summer wondering what to do next. With few prospects, he wrangled a favor from his cousin, Affia Wilson. Wilson, the principal of the local high school in Oil City, Pennsylvania, hired him to teach. For all the promise he would later realize as a seminal leader, it was a relationship—rather than his innate abilities alone—that landed Dewey his first job in a lifelong career in education.

Why Are We Ignoring Students' Networks?

The tendency of our K–12 education system to ignore students' networks is hardly surprising if we consider just how busy schools are kept trying to accomplish other things. In recent years, schools have come under enormous pressure to demonstrate their ability to drive up test scores—an effort that has proven persistently challenging. When President George W. Bush rolled out his flagship 2001 No Child Left Behind Education Act, his vision was seemingly simple: by measuring student outcomes and requiring that chronically underperforming schools improve, we could successfully close stubborn racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps by 2014.

What students knew—or didn't know—sat at the core of this vision. When Bush signed the bill, he insisted that schools needed to focus on the basics. "Every school has a job to do," he said. "And that's to teach the basics and teach them well. If we want to make sure no child is left behind, every child must learn to read. And every child must learn to add and subtract."⁴

The federal law, in other words, squarely focused on nailing basic proficiency in literacy and numeracy. Years later, despite modest improvement—and a few pockets of great success—schools are still scrambling to meet this charge, particularly those serving high-poverty and minority populations. Meanwhile, political battles wage over precisely what standards states should aim to meet and the best methods of teaching to get us there. In short, schools and society remain intently focused on *what* students know.

But this focus suffers from a critical blind spot. With everyone talking about what our students do and don't know, no one is talking about whom students know. Children's networks—their reservoir of social capital and ability to bank on that capital for support, advice, or opportunities down the line—remains largely determined by random luck: the luck of where children are born, whom their parents know, and whom they happen to end up sitting next to in class.

Put simply, the term *social capital* describes the benefits that people can accrue by virtue of their relationships or membership in social networks or other social structures.⁵ This book will explore young people's access to relationships that might help them further their

potential and their goals, as those goals emerge and shift over time. Of course, students may involve themselves in relationships or social networks that do little to help them advance in a positive direction. The goal of our education system, however, should be to arm all young people with networks that can reliably expand access to support, guidance, new opportunities, and positive life outcomes.

For decades, researchers have studied the basic principle that whom you know—both your strong connections and even your mere acquaintances—can matter quite a bit in lifelong success or failure. The strength of our networks even appears to predict our longevity.⁶ So why, then, do our schools not heed their importance?

At first glance, it's easy to blame the recent high-stakes nature of accountability and testing focused narrowly on what students know. But other cultural factors dating much further back than No Child Left Behind discourage schools from nurturing students' networks.

The very concepts of childhood and young adulthood can help to explain our aversion to expanding young people's networks. For centuries, we've treated childhood as a sacred period of innocence and fragility during which young people ought to be sheltered and protected, and only gradually exposed to the ways of the world. As Phillip Aries, famed French historian of childhood and family, put it, for much of history children were alternately thought of as "charming toys" or "fragile creatures of God who needed to be safeguarded and reformed."⁷ Early on, coddling or reforming children fell to the family. Later, as compulsory schooling spread through Western Europe and North America at the turn of the twentieth century, the responsibility to protect children shifted gradually to educators as well. Society delegated child rearing alternately to families and schools and then shut the door behind them.⁸

This impulse to protect children is more formalized than ever in our school systems and policies. In the wake of high-profile school shootings and growing reams of computer-based student data, over the past decade federal and state legislators have continued to ratchet up school safety regulations and student privacy laws.

Protecting children, in and of itself, is of course a very good thing. Children *are* more vulnerable to abuse. Their healthy development depends on ensuring that the adults charged with their care do right by that responsibility. But an outgrowth of these cultural norms is also a willful isolation of children. In the name of safety, we risk cutting off children's chances to expand their horizons and their networks.

This isolation comes at a particularly high cost for those children who lack sufficient support networks at home, or whose networks offer limited inroads to social mobility later on when they enter the labor market. What happens beyond school buildings exacerbates these effects. As income inequality increases, it produces unequal childhoods along a variety of dimensions—for example, access to schools, health care, and extracurricular opportunities. Families from different sides of the tracks are living in increasing isolation from one another. Neighborhoods themselves have regressed back to higher levels of socioeconomic segregation. And exposure to poor neighborhoods also still falls disproportionately along racial lines.⁹

Trends like these call into question our school system's ability to function as society's great equalizer. If a child's "embryonic community" is itself a reflection of his immediate neighborhood, children's networks are systematically cut off from peers and adults hailing from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and limited to the regions where they live. This leads to stark gaps in both the volume and diversity of young people's networks.

To this day, neighborhoods and schools by and large hold a monopoly on children's networks. Unsurprisingly, this costs poor children the most. On average, children from low-income families have measurably smaller networks along some dimensions and are much less likely to know adults working in high-paying professions.

The Potential to Disrupt Opportunity Gaps

Against this backdrop, however, the education system is undergoing major shifts.

As society grapples with the economic and political harms of growing inequality, the role of schools themselves is changing. With the rapid rise of technology, delivering academic content—once a key value proposition of traditional classrooms—is becoming commoditized. No longer must a teacher stand at the front of a class for students to access content. Students can now access a lecture, project, or assessment from a mobile phone anywhere in their home, neighborhood, or school building.

At the same time, schools are increasingly trying to ensure that they are modernizing their approaches to meet the demands of a changing economy. Many are turning to real-world projects and assessments. These mark an effort to make learning more relevant and engaging while instilling "twenty-first-century skills"—such as collaboration and critical thinking—that employers demand.

And as a college degree becomes a must-have in the modern economy, education reformers are finding that social supports are a critical ingredient to getting students into and through college.

In light of these shifts, schools are now well positioned to prioritize not merely what students know but also whom they know. And as technology improves, schools for the first time have tools that make investing in students' social capital viable on a strict budget. These forces stand to allow schools to begin to further chip away at stark divisions that have hampered schools' ability to deliver on equal opportunity for students rich and poor, white and minority, well-connected and isolated.

One of the critical forces underlying these shifts is disruptive innovation. Disruption is a market phenomenon that expands access to goods and services that are otherwise too expensive, centralized, and out of reach to many. Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen developed the theory of disruptive innovation in the 1980s and 1990s when he began to notice that wildly successful companies and entire industries would suddenly give way to new competitors that were offering seemingly rudimentary products and services. Christensen's research bucked the traditional wisdom that blamed senior management at these struggling firms. Instead, he theorized that new innovations displaced incumbents because they effectively competed on new dimensions such as affordability and accessibility. He coined this phenomenon *disruptive innovation*.

Decades later, the nonprofit Clayton Christensen Institute, where Julia has worked for over five years, is bringing these theories to bear on the public sector. The Institute's research on innovation shows that improving products and services at a pace that satisfies customers is actually rarely a problem. Most institutions want to keep improving what they do—and generally they are quite good at doing just that.