Reviewer’s report

Title: Does neighbourhood social capital make a difference for levelling the social gradient in the health and well-being of children and adolescents? A literature review.

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Reviewer: Kathryn P Derose

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This manuscript proposes to systematically review the literature on studies executed in selected Western countries to determine if social capital mediates or moderates the relationships between SES and health among children and adolescents. The study is strong methodologically; for example, at various points throughout the process multiple reviewers were involved and a validated abstraction tool was used to assess quality of the studies. Further, it offers the possibility of advancing both theoretical understanding of the role that social capital plays in child and adolescent health and informing policies to address social health inequalities. However, in its current state, the manuscript lacks conceptual clarity and at times the reporting of findings is hard to follow. More critical synthesis is needed to advance knowledge on the topic. I elaborate below on these and other ways to improve the paper.

Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. The main purpose of the study is to investigate whether social capital has a mediating or moderating effect on the relationship between SES and health-related outcomes in children and adolescents. Mediating and moderating effects are defined generically (top of p. 13), but it is important to contextualize these effects within a social capital framework. The authors should provide specific examples of how a particular social capital variable or component could mediate or moderate the relationship between SES and health among children and adolescents.

2. Similarly, the authors should explain how they determined whether a study “considered social capital as a mediating or moderating factor in the relationship between socioeconomic status and the health of children or adolescents” (bottom of p. 13). What specifically did it mean to model these relationships?

3. The authors should clarify whether they included studies that examined social capital as an independent variable and health outcomes of children and adolescents as outcome variables and also measured SES, even if these articles did not explicitly examine a mediating or moderating relationship? Given the relatively few number of studies identified and the early stage of research in this area, studies that examined the social capital and health among children and
adolescents and included measures of SES (but did not examine a mediating or moderating relationship) could possibly shed additional light on potential mechanisms.

4. One theoretical development in social capital research in the past decade has been the distinction among different types of social capital – bonding, bridging, and linking – and their potentially differential effects on health for various subpopulations. It would be helpful to know to what extent the measures used to examine health outcomes for children fall more in the bonding vs. bridging vs. linking social capital. What types have been studied in this arena and what is known about them in this context?

5. Table 2 needs more information about the particular measures used for social capital in each study; for example, it is stated in the text that all used a social capital scale, but how many items were in each scale? Were psychometric properties reported?

6. Similarly, some of the pathway descriptions (mediating or moderating) in Table 2 need to be revised to make it clear the direction of the relationships found, if any, at each step of the way.

7. The discussion section reads too much like a recitation of findings rather than a critical synthesis of findings and their implications for policy, research, and practice.

8. The discussion mentions at least a couple of times that four of the studies “confirmed our hypotheses,” yet these “hypotheses” are never clearly stated in the paper.

9. The paper should be edited for clarity and conciseness.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

10. The “weaknesses of the study” identified on p. 26 seem to be more the weaknesses of the evidence, not weaknesses of the review itself. These “weaknesses” (of the evidence) can be considered important findings of the review. The authors should identify weaknesses of their own study, such as the possibility that they missed some articles and that publication bias (where statistically significant findings are more likely to be published) could have resulted in them overestimating the evidence that social capital mediates or moderates the relationship between SES and health among children and adolescents.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a
statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.