

# From social capital to collaborative culture in schools

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## Abstract

The way any school functions depends heavily on the bonds that form among its members. This study examines how two concepts that capture this side of school life, social capital and collaborative culture, are connected. Social capital refers to the resources generated by interpersonal relationships and social networks when these are grounded in trust and a readiness to reciprocate, whereas collaborative culture is the shared framework of values and practices within which acting together becomes a community's norm. Within the school, the networks and partnerships that connect students, teachers and parents sustain both the learning process and the emergence of a positive climate. This study's aim, pursued through a narrative, theoretical review, is to show how this web of relationships, the school's social capital, gives rise to an authentic collaborative culture, which it strengthens and which, in turn, replenishes it. The analysis concludes that collaboration of this kind differs from its contrived, imposed counterpart precisely because it draws on such a foundation. Fostering a collaborative culture calls for steady, long-term investment in trusting relationships across the school, making the cultivation of those relationships central to the work of school leadership.

**Keywords:** Social Capital, Collaborative Culture, School, Trust.

## 1. Introduction

A school is a community of people in which the relationships among its members are a fundamental factor in its operation and in the educational process. Students, teachers and parents communicate and interact with one another, forming bonds of trust and mutual support that shape both learning and the school climate (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Understanding this relational dimension of education means examining two closely linked concepts: social capital and collaborative culture.

Over recent decades, interest in the role of social capital in education has intensified, as a steadily growing body of studies links social ties to educational processes and their outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002). At the same time, school culture, and its collaborative form in particular, is increasingly recognized as a decisive factor in school improvement and the quality of teaching (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Yet, although both concepts refer to the same web of relationships that underpins school life, they have for the most part developed separately, without the connection between them being made explicit. This gap leaves an essential question open: how does the relational resource we call social capital become the collective culture of a collaborative school?

The aim of the present study is to address this gap by bringing out the relationship between social capital and a school's collaborative culture. Specifically, it argues that social capital, which reflects the benefits arising from the social networks and shared norms that facilitate cooperation among the members of the school community (OECD, 2001), serves as the substrate from which an authentic collaborative culture emerges, one that in turn reinforces social capital. In methodological terms, this study is a theoretical, narrative review. It does not generate new empirical data but reviews and brings together existing scholarship (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). What it puts forward therefore has the character of a theoretical



proposition open to further inquiry, rather than an empirically verified conclusion, and the sources drawn upon were chosen for their relevance to the central question.

The study unfolds along this path. It opens by presenting social capital as a relational resource, clarifying the concept along with its dimensions and forms. Attention then turns to how social capital is produced and put to use within the school, in the networks of students, teachers and parents. From there, the discussion moves to school culture, to its features and levels. At the core of the study lies the transition from social capital to collaborative culture, traced through collaboration among teachers, students and families. A closing section draws together the conclusions, their practical implications and directions for future research.

## **2. Social capital as a relational resource**

The concept of social capital occupies a central place in the social sciences, yet it lacks a commonly accepted definition. What it is taken to mean shifts according to the research context and the theoretical starting point of each scholar (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Despite these divergences, the various approaches converge on a common core. Social capital consists of resources lodged in the ties that connect individuals, and not in those individuals themselves or in their material property. Arising from participation in social networks and from the cultivation of relationships built on trust and reciprocity, these resources foster cooperation toward shared goals (Fukuyama, 2000; Lin, 2001; Catts & Ozga, 2005). Such cooperation depends on informal norms of conduct, honoring one's obligations, honesty and returning favors, that permeate the bonds among a group's members and strengthen their sense of belonging to it (Fukuyama, 1997). Producing and preserving social capital demands ongoing investment in these relationships, made in expectation of a future benefit (Bullen & Onyx, 1998; van Deth, 2008).

The crystallization of the concept owes much to the contributions of a few foundational theorists. Bourdieu (1986) treats social capital as one of the three principal forms of capital, alongside the economic and the cultural, defining it as the sum of the actual or potential resources that an individual draws from membership in networks of institutionalized relationships of mutual recognition. Because social capital presupposes the building of durable bonds through which the economic and cultural capital individuals hold is set in motion, it tends to reproduce existing social inequalities, as privileged groups mobilize their connections to preserve their position of power in society (Fram, 2004; Warren, 2008). Coleman (1988) dwells less on the class dimension that preoccupies Bourdieu and more on the function of social capital, on the actions it makes possible. He regards it not as a single entity but as a set of heterogeneous elements of the social structure that share one feature: they facilitate the efforts of the individuals embedded within it, enhancing their productive activity. Coleman identifies three main components of social capital: trust, which secures the fulfillment of members' obligations within a network, together with reciprocity, the expectation that the positive actions exchanged between them will be returned; the flow of information, both within a single network and across different ones, which strengthens communication among members; and the norms of conduct that must be observed, along with the sanctions attached to them. He argues that closed, dense networks possess greater social capital, since they make it easier to establish mutual commitments (Coleman, 1988). Putnam (1993) describes social capital as a feature of social organization, with networks, norms, and trust chief among its attributes, that enables the coordination of individuals for the benefit of the whole. On his account, social capital is a public and not a private good. It is reinforced through use and wanes when left idle (Putnam, 1993). Portes & Sensenbrenner (1993) focus on the capacity of



individuals to derive benefits from their membership in networks, without losing sight of its darker side. In groups that are too tightly closed, the very mechanisms that generate solidarity can curb individual initiative and creativity and burden members with excessive demands (Portes, 1998).

According to Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998), social capital breaks down into three interrelated dimensions. The structural dimension concerns the architecture of the network itself: whom a person is connected to, whom they can approach for benefits, how strong the ties are, and how the connections are distributed hierarchically within a group or organization (Davenport & Daellenbach, 2011; Claridge, 2018). The cognitive dimension points to the shared meanings, language, codes and common vision that allow the members of a network to interpret reality in similar ways (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998; Gooderham, 2007). The relational dimension concerns the quality of the relationships that grow among the members of a network (Gooderham, 2007), and it centers on trust, the presence of obligations and identification with others (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005). The structural dimension is a precursor to both the cognitive and the relational (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998), since the network's connections support the social interaction that is a prerequisite for the emergence and maintenance of these latter two (Gooderham, 2007).

Depending on the kind of ties that compose it, social capital is commonly divided into three forms: bonding, bridging and linking (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001). Bonding social capital builds on the strong ties that develop within homogeneous groups, such as family, friends and one's close circle. It helps cultivate a sense of shared identity and security, yet it carries the risk of insularity and of shutting out those on the outside (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital draws on weaker ties between members of heterogeneous groups such as associates, colleagues and acquaintances, and widens people's opportunities and horizons by bringing together individuals with different experiences and resources (Putnam, 2000; Catts & Ozga, 2005). Linking social capital concerns the relationships formed between individuals or groups that differ in social background and stand in some hierarchical or power relation to one another, extending access to resources beyond one's immediate surroundings (Woolcock, 2001).

### **3. Social capital in the school**

School is not merely a place for transmitting knowledge and skills, which constitute human capital. It is also one of the principal settings in which children acquire social resources and social capital accumulates (Dufur et al., 2013). Beyond academic content, the school passes on social norms and patterns of behavior that prepare students to function within a collective context (Fukuyama, 2001). Inside the school, numerous social networks coexist and intersect, made up of students, teachers and parents. Within these networks grows the trust that allows their members to work together on academic, social and cultural activities. The trust students place in their teachers tends to carry over into their relationships with one another, making it more likely that they will join forces in shared school actions. The link between education and social capital runs in both directions, governed as it is by a dynamic of mutual reinforcement. When the members of the school community hold ample reserves of social capital, their participation in collaborative activities across the school setting increases, and that participation, in turn, generates fresh opportunities for informal learning and further strengthens the bonds of trust. Social capital, then, is not only a precondition for cooperation at school but also a product of it (Plagens, 2011).



The connection between school and family ranks among the most closely studied mechanisms for producing social capital at school (Crosnoe, 2004). Coleman (1988) found that in Catholic schools student achievement was higher and dropout rates lower than in non-Catholic ones, and he attributed the difference to the closer ties between students and parents and to the transmission of shared values that fed social capital, without, however, ruling out the part played by stricter discipline. Active parental involvement in school life appears to benefit student achievement, partly because the child perceives that those close to them take an interest in their education (Durlauf & Fafchamps, 2005). Regular communication between parents and teachers is associated with improved achievement and fewer behavioral problems (Tsang, 2010), whereas its absence stands as an obstacle to school success (Lareau, 2011). Parents' reaching beyond the narrow confines of the family, through contact with the educational institution and with other families, aids a child's progress more than relying solely on close family ties (Granovetter, 1983). Conversely, where the social capital available is limited, achievement tends to be lower, as studies of children from single-parent or large families with restricted means of communication and support have shown (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Downey, 1994). It is striking, nonetheless, that a school rich in social capital can partly make up for a deficit in parental involvement, curbing the delinquency of students who struggle academically (Hoffmann & Dufur, 2008).

However, a school's social capital is not beneficial by definition, since what matters is the form, it takes. Strong ties within groups of students sometimes uphold the school's cohesion and goals and sometimes undercut them, depending on whether they form around social or antisocial norms (Catts & Ozga, 2005). When such ties develop within tight, homogeneous cliques of students, reflecting bonding social capital, they reinforce a sense of belonging and mutual support, but they can isolate the group from the rest of the school community (Putnam, 2000). Bridging ties, by contrast, connect students to people and groups beyond their immediate circle, inside and outside the school, granting them access to knowledge, contacts and opportunities not available within their own group (Catts & Ozga, 2005). What decides whether relationships inside the school work in a cohesive or a divisive way, then, is not simply the quantity of social capital but the balance between these two forms of it (Murray et al., 2020).

#### 4. School culture

The relationships among the members of the many social networks operating within the school community develop inside a broader frame that shapes them: the culture of the school. School culture can be understood as the web of norms, values and shared meanings that take form gradually within an educational organization and become the property of its members (Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sath, 1998). It is a deeply rooted system of attitudes and beliefs that silently steers the way the members of the school community think, decide and act (Barth, 2002) and that, for Schein (1985), reaches down to their basic assumptions about the school itself and the world around it. Culture reflects a set of organizing principles (Erickson, 1987) that guide the school toward the fulfillment of its mission (Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sath, 1998) while lending it a distinct identity that sets it apart from every other institution (Deal & Kennedy, 1983). Because it is molded by the social environment, the history of each school, and its people, school culture is not static. It shifts and re-forms as social conditions change (Dalin & Rolff, 1993; Stoll, 1998). The social composition of the student body weighs heavily here, since the way students interact as a whole leaves its mark on the character and the workings of the institution (Thrupp, 1997).



School culture manifests itself in three areas: the professional relationships among members of the school community, the way the institution is organized and governed, and the opportunities it offers for learning. It is reflected, that is, in how teachers and students work together, in how the school's structures are managed, and in the degree to which the institution keeps its focus on the learning process (MacGilchrist et al., 1995).

The tie between culture and social capital comes into sharper view through culture's internal stratification. Schein (1985) distinguishes three levels of school culture. At the surface lie the visible norms of behavior among members of the school community. Beneath them, on the second level, rest the shared values, such as cooperation and trust, that do much to shape the school's goals, and for whose realization the behavioral patterns set by the first level are adopted. At the deepest level lie the unconscious beliefs and feelings that quietly run through the school's relationships. Tellingly, cooperation and trust, the very core of social capital, belong at the level of values (Schein, 1985). What is a resource for social networks is, for culture, a fundamental value. The relationships of trust among students, teachers and parents, moreover, which are one expression of a school's social capital, have been described as the foundation of cooperation among the members of the school community (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Culture, however, is not a single whole. Within one and the same school, distinct cultures coexist, those of students, teachers, leadership, other staff and parents, each with its own characteristics, at times converging and at times coming into conflict with one another (Stoll, 1998). The school's cohesion depends in large measure on the observance of shared norms that define what counts as acceptable action and conduct (Morgan, 1997). Those same norms, though, also determine how the institution receives any attempt at change. A reform aimed at improving the school is accepted only to the extent that the values it carries agree with those already governing its culture. Otherwise, it runs up against the resistance of the school community's members (Sarason, 1996). This point is crucial, since it means that the move toward a more collaborative way of working is not imposed from without but presupposes a change in the very values on which the school's culture is built.

## **5. From social capital to collaborative culture**

The forms of collaboration that take place in a school are not all of equal worth, nor does every collaborative practice necessarily attest to a collaborative culture. Taking as his criterion the relationships that develop among teachers, Hargreaves (1994) distinguishes four types of culture. Under individualism, each teacher works in isolation and autonomy, treating teaching as a personal matter rather than a collective endeavor, with mutual help nowhere to be found. At the opposite pole, a culture of collaboration is built on relationships of mutual support that teachers enter on their own initiative, free of any external compulsion. They exchange ideas and materials, observe one another's work and examine it together, in pursuit of their shared educational goals. Between the two extremes lie two incomplete types of culture. In contrived collegiality, collaboration does not spring from the teachers themselves but is imposed on them by the school administration, at set times and places and toward goals dictated from above. In balkanization, teachers neither work in isolation nor act as one, but form smaller groups with divergent interests and aims that often compete and undermine collaboration at the level of the school (Hargreaves, 1994).

The intensity of collaboration varies even within collegiality itself. Little (1990) singles out four forms of collegial relationship, ranging from the most superficial to the most demanding: the recounting of experiences, general support, the sharing of ideas and



materials, and, at the strongest end, joint work, which encompasses co-teaching, the mentoring of newer colleagues, mutual observation and collaborative planning with feedback. These last forms are also the most substantive, since they draw teachers into a relationship of mutual dependence and shared commitment (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

It is precisely here that the connection with social capital becomes visible. The difference between authentic, substantive collaboration and contrived collegiality may be seen less as a difference of process and more as a difference of foundation. A school's administration can fix the times and places of collaboration. What it cannot impose is the trust, the reciprocity and the readiness for meaningful engagement that authentic collaboration requires. These very things, trust, norms of reciprocity, interdependence, are what make up the social capital described earlier. When social capital is present in abundance, collaborative structures acquire real substance. When it is absent, those same structures yield a formal, surface-level collaboration.

Seen in this light, a collaborative culture is the form social capital takes once it settles into shared values of trust and reciprocity that pervade the whole school. Collaboration thereby ceases to be a property of isolated relationships. No longer dependent on who happens to be connected to whom, it becomes the collective way the institution operates. This is why the turn toward such a culture is not achieved by decree but through its reshaping, through the gradual construction of new values, understandings and norms (Fullan, 1996) that transform collective mindsets and sustain the desired patterns of behavior (Morgan, 1997). It requires, that is, that teachers reconsider their assumptions about what teaching means and enter into a collective process of decision-making and problem-solving (Fullan, 2007).

The fullest institutional expression of a collaborative culture among teachers is the professional learning community, which takes shape in schools where teachers share common values and vision, assume collective responsibility for the learning of every student, and examine their practices together and reflectively, in a climate of mutual trust and support (Stoll et al., 2006). The ingredients of such a community coincide with those of social capital, which makes it, in effect, its institutionalized form. Where it develops in earnest, both teaching and student achievement improve (Vescio et al., 2008).

This relationship is two-way and self-sustaining. If social capital is the precondition of a collaborative culture, the culture in turn renews it. When collaboration becomes part of the daily life of the school, it strengthens the trust and mutual respect among colleagues, elevates teaching, and consolidates improvements that endure (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). A virtuous circle thus forms: social capital gives rise to a collaborative culture, and the culture replenishes the social capital on which it feeds.

The circle between social capital and collaborative culture is not confined to teachers. Where a school is organized around a democratic and collaborative culture, students understand more deeply and gain more skills than in schools of traditional organization (Valentine, 2006). When a school makes room for the students' voice and treats them as partners and not as passive recipients, they form meaningful working relationships with their teachers and take an active part in school life (Mitra, 2004). Encouraging their participation in group and voluntary activities, within a supportive environment of safety and respect, lifts their performance, sharpens their social skills, and cultivates their own collaborative culture (Cooray, 2023). Cooperative learning techniques improve students' interpersonal relationships and teach them to offer one another help (Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sath, 1998), while the participation of teachers and students in decisions about the school's common



affairs reinforces a collaborative culture by fostering a sense of shared responsibility for how it runs (Cooray, 2023).

The third pillar of a collaborative culture is the school's relationship with the family. According to the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, school, family and community are interacting systems that share responsibility for a child's learning and development, and their partnership, through communication, voluntary involvement and joint decision-making, bolsters school success (Epstein, 2001). In this way a collaborative culture reaches beyond the walls of the classroom and the staffroom, binding teachers, students and parents together in a common effort on the child's behalf.

The path from social capital to a collaborative culture is not, therefore, a linear causal relation. It is the process by which a relational resource gradually becomes a collective value. The trust and reciprocity built up in the relationships among members of the school community acquire durability and coherence only once they are transformed into a shared culture of collaboration. And that culture sustains and renews the social capital that gave rise to it. On this reciprocal, self-reinforcing bond depends the functioning of the school as a collaborative community (Figure 1).

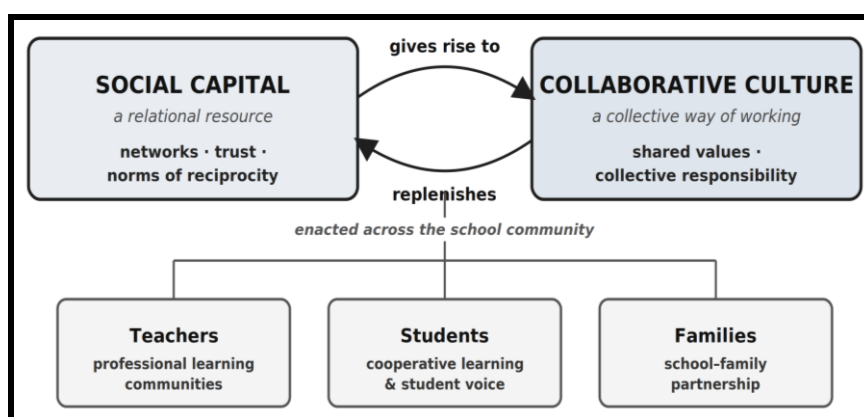


Figure 1. Social capital as the substrate of a collaborative school culture. The networks, trust and norms of reciprocity that make up social capital give rise to an authentic collaborative culture, which in turn replenishes them, forming a self-reinforcing cycle enacted across teachers, students and families

## 6. Conclusions

The present study traces the way social capital and a school's collaborative culture are connected, showing that they are two interdependent facets of a single phenomenon. Starting from social capital as a relational resource, one that encompasses social networks in which relationships of trust and reciprocity take form, and following its workings inside the school, the argument arrives at the conclusion that a collaborative culture is its collective expression at the level of the school as a whole. The central finding is that the distinction between self-initiated collaboration and collaboration imposed from without reflects the presence or absence of social capital. Where the relationships among members of the school community are governed by trust and reciprocity, working together toward shared goals and making decisions jointly acquire substance. In the opposite case, those same activities degenerate into a formality to be dispatched. The same logic reaches beyond teachers, into their relationship with students and families, since a collaborative culture flourishes when students are treated as co-shapers of school life and when parents are drawn in as partners to it. The same holds for the relationships among students themselves, through cooperative learning.



From this position follows a clear practical consequence for school administration and leadership. Since a collaborative culture is not imposed by decision from above but emerges from a substrate of relationships, what is asked of school leadership is not to institute more mechanisms of mandatory collaboration, but to cultivate the conditions from which authentic, unforced collaboration is born. In practical terms, this means investing in the building of trust among members of the school community, supporting professional learning communities, opening genuine channels of communication so that the students' voice is heard, and working systematically with families. Leadership that establishes relationships of trust creates the ground on which a collaborative culture can take root and endure.

These conclusions ought to be read in the light of certain limitations. The article is a theoretical review and synthesis of the literature, without primary empirical data, so the relationship it describes is offered as an interpretive scheme and not as an empirically tested finding. Moreover, both social capital and culture are concepts with multiple and contested definitions, which means that the synthesis necessarily depends on particular readings of them. The two-way, non-linear character of the relationship, furthermore, makes it hard to pin down the direction of causation. Finally, much of the literature drawn upon comes from particular educational systems, chiefly Anglo-Saxon ones, so transferring the conclusions to different educational and cultural settings calls for caution.

These limitations point, in turn, to directions for future research. Empirical studies are needed that examine how and under what conditions social capital turns into a collaborative culture, along with longitudinal research able to capture the two-way relationship between the two over time. Equally valuable is the study of this relationship across different national educational systems, so as to reveal whether the proposed scheme holds beyond the context in which it took shape. It is worth investigating, lastly, which specific leadership practices contribute most effectively to building the social capital on which a collaborative culture depends.

Beyond these particular extensions, the study's core contribution lies in turning attention away from the visible features of collaboration and toward the relational substrate that feeds them. A school's collaborative culture is not built through regulations and directives, but through the patient cultivation of the bonds of trust and reciprocity that support it from within.

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