

TEACHERS' SOCIAL CAPITAL: DIFFERENTIATIONS AND OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

The characteristics of social relations and social networks among teachers are a source of important predictive information pertaining to trust and cooperation among each other as well as confidence in institutional bodies and education in general. Social capital is all of different entities with common characteristics of actual or potential resources associated with the ownership of a social network of mutual acquaintance and recognition. The aim of this study is to present Primary education teachers' viewpoints of their social capital. The sample consisted of four one hundred Primary education teachers. The questionnaire includes questions regarding teachers' social capital dimensions and questions related to teachers' social capital off the school context, such as interpersonal relations. The results of this quantitative study have shown that Primary education teachers' social capital is related to their attitude towards social cohesion within the educational context, social support and the experienced feeling of "belonging".

Keywords: Social capital, teachers, primary school, Greece

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the '80s, scientific works on social capital were limited. However, over the past decades this term has been incorporated in multiple ways in various scientific and research fields and its relation to health, education, environment and economy has been thoroughly studied and showcased (Han et al., 2020. Tsounis, & Sarafis, 2016; Wu, 2021). The important role of social capital and social networks in the school environment has been underlined by many researches (Huang, 2009. Lindfors et al., 2018. Plagens, 2011. Tolentino, & Arcinas, 2018). These factors are conducive to social cohesion and confidence among teachers, as prerequisites for cooperation and relations of mutual reciprocal assistance among individuals and groups who share common objectives (Greenhow, & Burton, 2011. Johnson et al., 2015). The more teachers talk about labor issues with other members of the teaching personnel, the stronger their trust to their colleagues is. The models of social interaction in terms of relationships among the school teaching personnel can either reinforce or disempower social cohesion and teachers' trust to their colleagues and the school community as well as their learning and level of knowledge and, eventually, their students' performance (Goddard, 2003; Moolenaar et al. 2009).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bourdieu (1986; 2001) separates social capital from the economic, cultural and symbolic capitals and he defines it as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). According to Coleman (1990, p. 302) “social capital is defined by its function; it is not a unified entity, but rather a variety of different entities with

common characteristics: all of them consist of some aspects of social structure and enable some actions of individuals within the structure”. Putnam (1993, p. 167) defines social capital as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”. The range of social capital that one can take advantage of is related to the range of social networks that can potentially be exploited in an effective way, as well as the range of social resources available to individuals on the social network (Little, 2010; Lin, 2008). There is a correlation between social capital and other forms of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic), which are linked to people's social networks and provide material or symbolic benefits. (Bourdieu, 2001). The social context (of family or community), on which social capital is based, enables its occurrence with features such as trust, reliability, normative regulations, the manner in which the context functions (close or open social structure) (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). Social capital produces expressive and instrumental civic actions (Son, & Lin, 2008). Therefore, the more the social capital is used, the greater number of positive outcomes is brought about (Coleman, 1988). The relation between social capital and health, or education, politics, environment and economy has been thoroughly studied over the past years (Sarracino, & Minucka, 2016; Tsounis, & Sarafis, 2016). From a sociological point of view, the dimensions of social capital are a competitive advantage for individual and collective action, but it can not become the rule (Khan, & Khan, 2021).

Although a group characterized from heightened trust may manage more than one corresponding group lacking this characteristic. A decreased social capital negatively affects both social and political engagement and commitment of persons, their participation in the civil society or various social and political organizations (National Statistics, 2001; Putnam, 2000). A high social capital positively affects the pursuit and provision of support to reinforce and promote emotional resilience as well as the management of contemporary social issues

through social participation and commitment (Doll et al., 2009). Social capital, as civil society's raw material, is renewed through everyday face-to-face human interaction in various social networks based on the principles of confidence, mutuality and rules of actions, thus, achieving mutual benefit (Bullen, & Onyx, 1998). Most studies and researches that measure social capital focus on its positive features and the ways of its reinforcement through various aspects of its function towards the advancement of the individual and society (Granovetter, 1973; Grenfell, 2009; Inkpen, & Tsang, 2005; Plagens, 2011; Warner, 1999). Over the past years, there has been obvious interest in social capital (in social, political and economic sciences) (Koniordos, 2006; Swan, 2003; Trigilia, 2001). Moreover, non-recognition of its negative features and their subsequent impact on the community (social exclusion, reproduction of inequalities, etc.) has been criticized (Kritsotakis et al., 2009; Loizos, 2002; Mitchell, & LaGory, 2002; Portes, 1998; Portes, & Sensenbrenner, 1993. Sotiropoulos, 2006).

As regards teachers, social capital and social networks play a crucial role in information dissemination and accessibility to educational resources and support (Demir, 2021; Penuel et al., 2009; Smylie, 1989) and they are related to a broader sense of teacher effectiveness and commitment (de Jong et al., 2016), student higher performance (Pil, & Leana, 2009), the development of better teaching practices (Modipane, & Themane, 2014) and educational changes (Uekawa et al., 2006) as well as emotional health and social cohesion (Dadvar et al., 2019). Teachers' social capital is affected by the school climate developed in schools and by school principals' arrangements (Penuel et al., 2009).

The aim of this study is to show Primary education teachers' viewpoints of their social capital.

METHODS

1.1 Sample

The research sample consisted of 400 Primary education teachers (134 men and 266 women). As regards their age span, it should be noted that 78 of the participants were below 30 years old, 108 of them were between 30 and 40 years old, 150 of them were between 41 and 50 years old and 64 of them were over 51 years old. In the preliminary stage, the selection of schools, in relation to the sample of teachers, was based on the following criteria: type of schools (grade), organization of school and geographical location. In the secondary stage, random sampling was applied among the selected schools. The research was conducted throughout the academic year 2016-2017.

1.2 Research tool

International literature highlights a series of research tools and approaches to measure social capital as well as various qualitative and quantitative methods on an individual and collective level depending on the research purpose. However, the ambiguity and multitude of definitions do not contribute effectively to the formation of research variables. In this respect, a questionnaire was constructed to serve the purpose of this study and it was based on social capital theory and Bullen and Onyx's approach (2005). Bullen and Onyx's approach (Social Capital Questionnaire) focuses on eight dimensions of social capital: 1. Participation in local community, 2. Proactivity in a social context, 3. Feelings of trust and safety, 4. Neighborhood Connections, 5. Family and Friends Connections, 6. Tolerance of Diversity, 7. Value of life, 8. Work Connections (Bullen, & Onyx, 2005). Taking into consideration the above, eight questions were constructed to serve the exploration of teachers' social capital dimensions within the school context after their integration into it with focus on their participation, friendship and professional networks, initiative-taking and trust as

well as tolerance of diversity. Twelve more questions were added to it in order to explore individual issues related to teachers' social capital off the school context, such as free time and interpersonal relations.

To ensure the validity of the particular research tool, that is the required degree to which teachers' social capital is explored within the school context, an a priori attempt was made to construct it in such a way so that it meets the terms of "representative content" validity. "Representative content" validity was based on the researchers' thorough study, as stated above, of the corresponding theory and on equivalent measure scales of social capital. Furthermore, the questionnaire was evaluated prior to its application by ten social scientists. They evaluated the questions in terms of content relativity to social capital based on the five-point scale (1=not relative and 5=absolute relative). The analysis of the evaluation results (mean score of questions = 4,8) of these scientists indicated the validity and adequacy of the content of the questionnaire ("presumption of validity"). Moreover, the coefficient of split-half reliability for the questionnaire was found 0,82 and the coefficient of reliability for internal consistency was found 0,84.

It should be noted that this research was piloted using a sample of 30 public school teachers across Greece. Upon processing of protocols, the degree of discretion was found and some questions were modified, as they were difficult to understand. Additionally, the content of some questions was enriched, when necessary.

FINDINGS

To better compare teachers' social capital and form certain profiles, the answers were grouped on the basis of the eight basic questions of social capital within the school context. The analysis of "clusters" helped form two groups. The observation of clusters centers that derived from the analysis of "clusters" indicated that both "clusters" shared the following characteristics (Table 1): the

first “cluster” (Group 1) was characterized by a high social capital (HSC), as they reported in a satisfactory or very satisfactory degree that teachers, after their recruitment, became more social, made new friends, and developed better understanding of the social context. Furthermore, they developed their critical thinking, actively participated in social and volunteer organizations, had a high sense of belonging and trust and were more tolerant of diversity. On the contrary, the second “cluster” (Group 2) was characterized by a lower social capital (LSC), as they reported in a low degree that teachers, after their recruitment, became more social, made new friends, and developed better understanding of the social context. Moreover, they reported that they developed their critical thinking, actively participated in social and volunteer organizations, had a high sense of belonging and trust and were more tolerant of diversity. The first group included 238 teachers and the second one 146.

Table 1. Clusters centers

Questions	Clusters	
	Group 1*	Group 2
After my recruitment I became more social or I made new friends	3,46	1,97
After my recruitment I understood better the social and political context	4,11	2,84
After my recruitment I developed critical thinking and my views on certain issues changed	3,78	2,15
After my recruitment I actively participated in organizations, associations and volunteering	3,93	2,25
After my recruitment I became more tolerant and showed more respect to tolerance	3,31	1,58
After my recruitment I became more tolerant and showed more respect to tolerance	4,09	2,55
After my recruitment I developed the feeling of belonging to a group	4,04	2,51
Some days I do not know whom to trust	1,61	3,22

*1=Very little 5=Very much, *Group 1: 238 teachers, Group 2: 146 teachers*

The difference in teachers’ social capital determines the support they potentially seek from other members of the school community or their relatives.

Thus, based on the results of Table 2 it is obvious that: a) all teachers consider their colleagues as the basic resource of support, b) the syndicalist unions are the least reliable when it comes to tensions and difficulties within the school context, c) teachers with HSC use more the internal resources of support of the school community compared to the teachers with LSC, d) to manage any difficulties, teachers primarily address their closer resources and then the more “remote” institutional resources, e) individuals with HSC seek their colleagues’ support to a larger degree compared to their counterparts with LSC, f) the individuals with LSC consider their colleagues as the main resources of support, followed by their relatives and non-school friends, g) non-school friends are considered an important source of help for all teachers.

Table 2. Communication in case of difficulty in the school context

Resource of support	N/%	LSC	HSC
With their colleagues	N	148	76
	% in the group	63,8%	52,1%
The syndicalist union	N	40	18
	% in the group	17,2%	12,3%
My non-school friends	N	84	58
	% in the group	36,2%	39,7%
My friends in school	N	96	54
	% in the group	41,4%	37,0%
My relatives	N	52	44
	% in the group	22,4%	30,1%
With the Principal	N	52	22
	% in the group	22,4%	15,1%
With the school counsellor	N	60	26
	% in the group	25,9%	17,8%

The difference of mean scores of the two separate groups (HSC – LSC) in terms of exploration of the feeling of social cohesion indicated a statistically significant difference [$t_{380} = -4,483$, $p=0.00$, $Mean_{HSC}=3,93$ $SD_{HSC}=1,04$, $Mean_{LSC}=3,46$ $SD_{LSC} = 0,95$]. Teachers with HSC believe more, with statistically significant difference, that social cohesion among their school

teachers is very powerful compared to their counterparts with LSC who hold an average view about this.

As regards the effects of their professional integration, teachers with HSC believe that there is increase in: a) their social interaction, b) the feeling of trust and “belonging”, c) the sense of their personal identity and d) their thorough studying of cognitive subjects. The above views are also supported by teachers with LSC, but in a lower degree. What is more, issues of interpersonal relations and science are considered to be of the most important consequences by both groups of social capital. Based on the degree of significance, the above two factors are followed by the factors of participation in social issues and the sense of personal identity. Increased confidence in people is not underscored by either group in relation to the other consequences.

Table 3. Consequences of professional integration

Effects of their professional integration	N/%	HSC	LSC
More interpersonal relations	N	194	88
	% in the group	82,2%	61,1%
More participation in social issues	N	136	68
	% in the group	57,6%	47,2%
Decrease of isolation	N	70	40
	% in the group	29,7%	27,8%
Increase of trust to people	N	68	24
	% in the group	28,8%	16,7%
Stronger sense of identity and “belonging”	N	112	40
	% in the group	47,5%	27,8%
Stronger sense of personal identity	N	98	46
	% in the group	41,5%	31,9%
More interest in science-related cognitive issues	N	166	96
	% in the group	70,3%	66,7%

DISCUSSION – CONCLUSIONS

Research in social capital has increased over the past years and it is expected to become even more interesting under the conditions of “imposed” confinement and human social distancing throughout the outbreak of the pandemic. This is so, because social capital is a key factor for the development of social web, social cohesion and trust as well as the achievement of positive results in education (Algan et al., 2013; Forsyth, & Adams, 2004; Fukuyama, 1995; 2001; Kawachi et al. 1997). The aim of this research was to explore teachers’ social capital within the school environment and delve into understanding its relation with social cohesion variables (social networks and trust).

This research indicated that teachers with HSC, after their recruitment, are characterized by a high degree of sociability and active participation in various social organizations and by a high degree of social relations through their participation in networks of friends. At the same time, they understand better their social context and develop a high sense of belonging to it as well as trust and tolerance of diversity. All the above underscore the significance of teachers’ smooth professional integration with positive effects in terms of their social interaction, the development of trust and their devotion to issues of knowledge. After all, both teacher groups provide strong evidence that their professionalization has been conducive not only to developing interpersonal relations and more active participation and involvement in social issues, but also to their in-depth engagement with science, yet in a different degree. International researches evidence that the high social capital is positively correlated with the development of teaching practices, development of cooperation and their students’ participation in social practices, supporting the view that forward-thinking education promotes social capital (Algan et al., 2013). According to Fukuyama (1995), common rules or values are shared through social capital since

they are generated by real social relations and put forward social cooperation and the notion of culture.

This research showed that there is correlation between teachers' social capital with social cohesion, as a school characteristic, and the development of trust among the members of the community. Indeed, the high degree of social capital seems to contribute positively to the discussion and pursuit of support by the members of the school community when it comes to school-related issues or problems. The higher the teachers' social capital is, the more they address their colleagues to seek help when faced with school problems. As a result, they address remote institutional resources to a smaller degree, a fact which underlines their high sense of social cohesion.

Researches which explore teachers' professional relations, as the outcome of social relations developed within the workplace, have indicated the key role of social capital in terms of trust among teachers in individual relations. The higher the social capital is, the easier it is for teachers to develop social relations in their workplace and build more trust to the other members of the school community. Social interactions provide the school community with the opportunity to build teachers' trust among each other (Moolenaar et al., 2009). Researches have shown that social and friendship networks developed among teachers positively contribute to the dissemination of educational reforms and innovations as well as to generation of new knowledge and educational practices (Moolenaar et al. 2009; Daly, & Finnigan, 2010; Cole, & Weinbaum, 2007; Coburn, & Russell, 2008; Moolenaar et al., 2011. Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 1998). Social interactions have positive effects on important aspects of social life, as stated by Bourdieu (1986), because the individual's expanded association with people of different specialties and interests interacts with their cultural capital and multiplies the opportunities to access knowledge. These results provide valuable information to those responsible for formulating educational policy,

regarding the need to strengthen the social capital of teachers and to monitor the social networks that are developed in the school context.

To conclude, the features of social relations and social networks developed among teachers provide important predictive information about trust among each other, their cooperation (fundamentally important to the school community), trust to institutional bodies and, generally, to education. Studying the factors that define teachers' social capital in direct pertinence with developing and maintaining the social web of the school community can provide useful information about teacher development and the teaching practice which eventually contribute to teacher and student learning. Teachers' social capital is a very important determinant of successful education policies. Therefore, it is important for this study to observe the social composition of teacher groups within the school environment and by applying extensive educational researches to analyze social networks to reinforce teachers' social capital.

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