Social Work
& Education

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# SOCIAL CAPITAL OF PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE GREEK EDUCATION SYSTEM

**Abstract**. This research explores the social capital of primary school students. The participants were thirty-two students in the fifth and sixth grades of primary school, and a semi-structured interview was used as a data collection method. The research outcomes highlighted that the students: a) stated that there are tensions and conflicts in the classroom, but they considered the classroom as a valuable part of their daily life, b) had increased social capital in specific dimensions (decision making, voluntary initiatives). In addition: a) the majority of students participated in social activities at school and in voluntary groups outside school, b) the dimension of trust seemed to be the one that was not enhanced as much as the other social capital dimensions, and had gender characteristics, and c) there was the establishment of social exclusions due to individuals' particular characteristics.

**Keywords:** Social capital; primary school students; social networks; trust; friendships; marginalisation.

## INTRODUCTION

From its emergence to today, the school system has been the institutional agent aimed at socialisation, cognitive development, and selection of individuals for labour market integration (Backledge & Hunt, 2019). The entrance of individuals into school also marks their integration into peer groups and the beginning of their social capital formation. Social capital is associated with resources developed through an individual's participation in social networks and utilising these resources to obtain social benefits (Bourdieu, 1986). This means that social capital reflects the sum of the advantages gained by those individuals who participate in common networks or groups. The size of the social capital of actors depends on the magnitude of the network of connections they can successfully mobilise, as well as on the volume of capital (economic, cultural, or symbolic) available to each of those they are linked to. Bourdieu attributed a Marxist dimension to this, viewing it as a class characteristic. Putnam (1993. 1995) thus defines social capital as a repository of social trust, norms, and social networks among citizens, which can enhance the effectiveness of communities and societies. Putnam (1995), in Bowling Alone, focusing on Americans' engagement with communities, mentioned a decline that threatened democracy and quality of life, highlighting that this was due to issues relating to trust and reciprocity embedded in individuals' social networks. Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) define social capital as the expectations for action within a group. According to Portes (1998), social capital refers to individuals' ability to secure their advantages and benefits through participation in social networks in the social structure. Lin (2017) stated that social capital consists of the resources embedded in social relationships and social structure, activated when the social actor wants to increase the probability of success in intentional actions. In recent decades, social capital has been associated with the educational context. Common to all the definitions given from time to time are trust in individuals and institutions, social interaction, normative regulations, the value-based nature of social capital, its relationship with social networks, and political participation (Giavrimis et al., 2022; Koniordos, 2010).

## SOCIAL CAPITAL AND EDUCATION

Several studies argue that social capital is not only an essential factor of education but also one of its valuable outcomes (Heyneman, 1998; Salloum et al., 2017). Community involvement in education can manifest social capital since it is formed through repeated transactions and interactions (Dubos, 2017). Social capital is derived through education in three main ways: a) students practice social capital skills such as participation and reciprocity; b) schools provide forums for community activities, and through education, students learn how to participate responsibly in their community; and c) education can also promote social cohesion and enhance citizenship when children from all socio-economic backgrounds are enrolled in public education (World Bank, 2011).

The relevant literature on social capital and education suggests a two-way reinforcing relationship between solid social networks and academic achievement (Baron et al., 2000). In Dika and Singh's (2002: 41) review of 14 studies on the association between social capital and school achievement, it was found that all social capital indicators were positively correlated. Huang (2009) also finds that when human

capital is mediated by social capital, the result is that school achievement increases. A study by Göksen and Cemalcilar (2012) in Turkey on 764 mother-child pairs showed that social capital, measured by the quality of teacher-student interaction and parental involvement, strongly affects children's retention in school.

Social capital variations are associated with structural resource allocation factors such as time and participation skills and cultural and mediating factors linked to social networks related to significant others (Basu, 2006). Social capital, in addition to that of parents, is also produced at the classroom level. The above is also confirmed by Astone et al. (1999), who referred to three dimensions of social capital related to relationships, their quality, and the resources the individual acquires. Ames (1992) states that the classroom environment can encourage students to be either mastery-oriented (learning) or performance-oriented (performance). Although the international literature avoids using social capital for peer relationships, these produce social capital (van Rossem et al., 2013). Children build social networks and relationships of certainty and trust in the school context with both their peers and teachers.

*This study aims* to approach the social capital of primary school students through their views.

### *Methods*

The qualitative method was applied in this research. It aims to describe and analyse various events in the external world as constructed by social subjects. Its main feature is an interpretive and naturalistic approach to social reality (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The qualitative method emphasises the subjective experience, conceptualisation, and subject's linguistic code to highlight social phenomena (Tsiolis, 2014).

### *Participants*

In qualitative social research, subjects are selected to serve the purposes of the study (Mantzoukas, 2007). This study selected individuals knowledgeable about the topic under discussion and communication skills to provide in-depth responses (Tsiolis, 2014). Participants were selected based on the class in which they were students and their gender. A requirement for collecting qualitative data was the saturation of the results (Bonidis, 2004). The participants were 32 students in the fifth and sixth grades of primary school on Lesvos Island. Eighteen of them were girls, and fourteen of them were boys.

### *Research tool*

A semi-structured interview was used as a research tool for data collection. The construction of the research instrument was based on the tools previously developed to study social capital measurement. Trust, reciprocity, social cohesion, participation, social engagement and commitment, perception of community-level structures or characteristics, social interaction, social networks, and social support are considered key dimensions for social capital research (Inglehart & Abramson, 1994. Linardis et al., 2012: 3; Ruston & Akinrodoye, 2002: 4-8. World bank, 2011). Accordingly, the thematic categories of the formulated interview guide were: a) Participation in decisions. Some indicative questions were: "Have you taken any initiative on an issue? Which one?" "Do you participate in classroom decisions about activities, e.g., celebrations, excursions, etc.". b) Social participation. Some indicative questions were:

"Do you participate in voluntary groups? In which ones?" and "Do you think that in some activities you are excluded?". c) Social networks - social support. Indicative questions were: "How many 'good' friends do you have? Why? How would you describe them?" "How often do you meet or talk on the phone with your friends?". d) Trust - reciprocity. Some indicative questions were: "Do you, in general, trust your classmates? Why?" "How many people do you think you trust in your class? Why? How would you describe them?" and e) Social interaction. Some indicative questions were: "If you would describe a classmate you do not like playing or hanging out with, what characteristics would he or she have?"

### Research procedure

The interview process was carried out with the parent's consent and permission from the relevant education committee. It was also conducted in a convenient place for the participants, and the communication with the research subjects for the interview was face-to-face. The research subjects and their parents were informed about the purpose and content of the research and ethical issues (anonymity, recording issues, and disclosure of findings) (Kvale, 2008).

The transcription of the recorded interviews followed, and the process of thematic analysis was initiated, integrating the volume of data to highlight the participants' collective experiences (Isari & Pourkos, 2015). The sentence referring to the topic to be explored was used as the unit of analysis. An inductive system of categories and subcategories was formulated to code the data (Bonidis, 2004).

As limitations of the research, we can mention the small number of participants, the impossibility of generalizing the results, and the use of only one research tool.

## FINDINGS

### Social action - Decision-making

Children take the initiative, help the teacher, participate in activities, and manage classroom functions, e.g., the classroom counter:

E2: «I help the teacher at the computer, distributing notebooks, and if he needs something else,"

E11: «We clean the classroom before the teacher comes in…»

E6: «In our roles in the plays, the teacher lets us improvise….»

E9: «We create a fund, and the money we collect is used for classroom needs or to help people in need...».

Most students participated in social activities, such as painting the school and collecting food for vulnerable groups: E21: «I help paint the walls of the schoolyard" "This year we cleaned the playground near the school…» E15: «…we collected food for refugees…» and in voluntary groups outside school, such as the scouts, traditional dance clubs, or support for vulnerable groups. E27: «I have been going to the scouts since childhood…» «I go to traditional dances and choir….» E9: «We create a fund, and the money we raise is used for classroom needs or to help people in need...».

Most of the students showed participation in decision-making on classroom issues. They all decide by negotiation: E1: «Most people discuss with us…» E2: «We have a chair, and we all decide together on classroom issues. With a small quantity of fuss, of course...» E3: «My classmates generally listen to me…» while there are also

isolated students: E26: «At school, I had no friends. My only company was my sister. I talked to all the kids and helped them with homework, but that was it».

### *Social networks - Social support - Trust*

Children mentioned that they form friendships and groups to play games with, both at school during school breaks and outside of school. Sub-groups are also included within them, and they reported that competition took place between them regarding important school-age issues such as school performance:

E4: «Because there are so many of us children, we have big groups, we play endless hours at breaks and too many games! At break times, we run outside like crazy to play. Uh... we have many friends, and the game continues after school»,

E19: «The friends! Okay, there are scattered sub-groups in the groups that have been formed»,

E26: «The whole class was a group…. »

E12: «Uh... we have friends but, and the groups have a competition ............ and in school who will come out and who will get a better grade ......... they have a competition».

The groups have gender characteristics. Girls tend to form 'closed,' small groups of friends, consisting of same-sex individuals, and hold activities that follow their social stereotypes: E2: «I have two good friends,» E5: «Every afternoon I play with my friends in the neighbourhood,» E23: «In primary school, I hang out with four or five other girls, it is good ... we have fun, we play outside school». There is a rivalry with boys since they describe them as annoying, immature, and aggressive: E2: «Boys bother us all the time...», E8: «... they are immature. They are only interested in football...», E14: «…boys... always fight and talk in class», E25: «…boys always say nonsense in class, and we laugh...».

Boys said that they form large groups (of the same sex), but without the cohesion of girls and have a rivalry with their female peers: E1: «I have many friends...», E3: «We are all friends...», E21: «…we all play football together, but sometimes we fight…», E17: «…girls away... they are gossips!».

Participation in these groups, either as a supporter or a supported individual, offers significant benefits and can provide valuable information, social resources, emotional support, and encouragement (Coleman, 1988; Novak et al., 2018). Students give each other the resources to accomplish their academic goals (Ulmanen et al., 2022). Through interpersonal relationships, students can practice prosocial skills and dynamically develop multiple binary bonds, which may vary in intensity, duration, and complexity, forming a network that influences themselves and society (Novak et al., 2018).

Furthermore, a feeling of mutual help among the students was noted in a positive classroom climate: E11: «When someone has difficulties, I help them…», E15: «We generally have a good time in the classroom. We laugh, make jokes...», «My classmates help me in my lessons…».

The majority seem to trust in a few people, mainly of the same sex, while girls seem more reserved: E16: «I do not tell my secrets to everyone…», E2: «I only tell my secrets to M... and C...», E14: «I would never tell a secret to a boy because he will tell everyone…», E23: «I only trust a friend because I know that whatever I tell her she will

not tell anyone else.». On the other hand, boys seem to trust people more quickly, especially people of the same gender: E11: «I discuss everything with my friends…», E27: «I have no secrets from my friends…», E1: «I know my friends' secrets, so I tell them mine too…», E17: «I do not tell my secrets to girls. They are gossip».

Research has shown that people with confidence in their abilities will likely implement appropriate strategies when faced with a problematic situation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

### *Marginalisation- Popularity*

Moreover, students seemed to reject a few of their classmates, attributing to them characteristics such as being grumpy, immature, selfish, annoying, and two-faced:

E12: «I do not want to hang out with M... because he is always picking on me and getting annoying…»

E20: «I do not hang out with D... anymore because she said something I told her, and she embarrassed me...»

E16: «I do not want to sit at the same desk with B... (Roma) because he stinks.»

E32: «I do not want to hang out with R... because she is poncy».

Most research suggests peer social exclusion mainly affects aggressive and disruptive children (Coie et al., 1990, pp. 370-371; Fite et al., 2012). Students with a small range of social networks showed more aggression and disruptiveness and had lower levels of cooperation compared to students who did not have such difficulties. The reduction or elimination of social networks leads to social exclusion, defined as the social relationship of absence or removal of social, political, or even individual rights from specific categories of the population in a society as a whole (Chrysakis, 2005). At the same time, social capital and positive and supportive relationships between students and teachers predicted less school burnout and better academic performance of students (Lindfors et al., 2018; Novak et al., 2018). In addition, exclusion from social networks is considered to reduce individuals' abilities to cope with anxiety (Leary, 1990), acquire a social identity (Ward, 2009), receive emotional support or material help, and access services and information (Berkman & Glass, 2000).

At the same time, the participating students listed as popular peers those who are distinguished for their athletic qualities, physical appearance, and excellent school achievement in classes: E3: «Everyone wants to be in the same team as M.... because he is the best football player in the school…», E5: «…all the girls want M... (handsome)…», E10: «…the president of the class is B...... (the best student)…», E28: «…other children like it and are diligent and are the so-called good students and respectively there are the mediocre ones who combine everything and the children who are thus more into sports,…» or individuals are distinguished from the rest because of their diversity: E23: «I am very much impressed by one of my very good friends who is last in the class…», E15: «A girl who has lost her father, we show her special adoration and love so that she does not feel bad…». Research on students' sociometric status and peer acceptance has shown that peer relationships are correlated with students' academic performance in school. Students their peers do not accept tend to have poor academic achievement (Li, 2001) and drop out of school (Coie et al., 1990). Social preference shows a strong positive correlation with cooperativeness and support and a

negative correlation with annoyance, disruption, and aggression (Rose et al., 2017). According to Milgram and Palti (1993), a positive relationship exists between popularity and children's academic competence.

## DISCUSSION

The classroom relational dynamics and students' academic performance are affected by the formation of their social capital. Van Rossem et al. (2013), in their study of 1036 children in 60 first-grade classes, found that children's social capital at the classroom level is related to school adjustment, while at the collective level, it can have a negative impact by reducing academic achievement. Our research revealed that: a) students, through daily tensions and conflicts among themselves, perceived the classroom as a valuable part of their daily lives while having increased social capital on specific dimensions. The majority of students seem to be involved in decision-making on classroom issues and take the initiative and participate in social activities at school and in non-school voluntary groups; b) in addition, the trust component seemed to be the one that does not develop as much as the other components, which may impact the educational outcomes, according to the social capital literature. It appears that gender played an essential role in the perception of team formation. Girls tend to create 'closed,' small groups of people of the same gender, while boys form large groups (of the same gender) but without the cohesiveness of specific groups. Social support provides persons with three types of information: that they are cared for by someone, that they are loved and recognised, and that they belong to a network of communication and mutual trust (Cobb, 1976; Ulmanen et al., 2022; Mishra, 2020). Freire's (2000) school of thought, democratic education is "founded on trust in people." Individuals, through education slowly and through their interaction, create new paths of social interaction and trust by expanding their social capital; c) we also have the establishment of social exclusions because of specific characteristics of individuals, incredibly annoying or aggressive ones. Students seemed to reject a few of their classmates, to whom they attribute characteristics such as grumpy, immature, selfish, annoying, and two-faced, and award as popular classmates who are distinguished for their athletic abilities, attractive appearance, and excellent performance in classes. Social networks in the school environment explain the marginalisation and exclusion of students (Buhs et al., 2006; Dodge et al., 2003; Eivers et al., 2012; Zulauf, 2012).

The social context mediates students' behaviours, relationships and interactions, social pursuits, and outcomes. Educational policies practised in an environment where the networking of the information society, the provision of dynamically renewed information, the exam-centred curricula of the Greek educational system, and the student-centred project shape the school climate and drastically affect students' relationships with other members of the school community and their performance. Restrictive and maladaptive educational policies exacerbate the "utilitarian" approach to Greek schooling, exacerbate social inequalities and marginalise groups or individuals.

Moreover, the developing competition, the breaking of the individual's relationship with the traditional way of education, and the need for education to function, often as a "business," transform the interaction between students and teachers, forming structural revisions in the structure of the school framework. The postmodern

school exercises symbolic violence by imposing systems of symbolism and meanings that shape individuals' social capital. Students' subjective perceptions of the school environment and themselves within it determine their behaviour, perhaps more so than the objective facts of that environment, and are closely linked to their intentions, attitudes, aspirations, evaluations, and behaviour (Matsangouras, 2000). The social actions of individuals, their initiatives, friendships or marginalisation, and popularity of individuals are in dynamic interaction with the elements of the environment and the characteristics of individuals. High social capital enhances students' achievement "positively" or "productively." (Mishra, 2020). High social capital motivates and develops attitudes and values, reinforcing or undermining the school's aims, encouraging students to exercise their socio-cognitive skills, and promoting development. The developmental characteristics of students are reflected in their social choices (Behtoui & Strömberg, 2020). Still, these, too, are part of the dominant aims of education as part of the individual's intra-group integration and differentiation from other social groups with different characteristics (Blackledge et al., 2019; Bourdieu, 1986). The diversity of the student population creates exclusion and marginalisation, while the children have not internalised the new school era's precepts of acceptance and solidarity.

In conclusion, the research results showed that students consider the classroom a valuable part of their daily life through the daily tensions and conflicts between them. They had increased social capital in specific dimensions (decision-making, voluntary initiatives); the trust dimension seemed less developed than the other dimensions. Their choices of group composition had gender characteristics; socially excluded students had specific unacceptable features. International research demonstrates the association of social capital with students' academic achievement and behaviour in the school context. The relationship of trust and reciprocity with students, the relationship of honesty, reliability, and respect for the teacher, the involvement of parents in the school, and their communication with the teacher have a positive impact on academic achievement, create motivation for student participation, develop the support of the social context and promote mutual help and expectations of the individual. Social capital is a potent mediator related to students' learning motivations, conceptualisations, school performance, and interactions and actions, individually or collectively.

In the current social context, it is essential for the students, through the supportive processes of transformative and democratic education and their life experience, to form functional "pieces" of a unified self; it is necessary to construct identities that contain elements of mutual understanding, empathy, structural elements of self-determination and self-consciousness (Giddens, 2009) and to reject the symbolism of stereotypes of the postmodern era that through the 'egotistical' self, alienate it and affect the educational process and its interaction with 'others.' Educational policies and researchers must consider the social capital component when designing, implementing, enforcing, and evaluating educational results.

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# СОЦІАЛЬНИЙ КАПІТАЛ УЧНІВ ПОЧАТКОВОЇ ШКОЛИ В СИСТЕМІ ОСВІТИ ГРЕЦІЇ

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*Анотація.* *Соціальний капітал пов'язаний з ресурсами, створеними завдяки участі індивіда в соціальних мережах і використанні цих ресурсів для отримання соціальних вигод. Варіації соціального капіталу пов'язані зі структурними факторами розподілу ресурсів, такими як час і навички участі, а також культурні та посередницькі чинники, пов'язані з соціальними мережами, значимими іншими людьми. Соціальний капітал виробляється на рівні класу. У шкільному контексті діти будують соціальні мережі, стосунки певності та довіри як зі своїми однолітками, так і з учителями.*

*Це дослідження присвячене вивченню соціального капіталу учнів початкової школи. У ньому взяли участь тридцять два учні п'ятих і шостих класів початкової школи, а методом збору даних було напівструктуроване інтерв'ю.*

*Результати дослідження показали, що учні: а) зазначили, що в класі існують напруженість і конфлікти, але вони вважають клас цінною частиною свого повсякденного життя; б) збільшили соціальний капітал у певних вимірах (прийняття рішень, добровільні ініціативи). Крім того: а) більшість учнів брали участь у громадській діяльності в школі та у волонтерських групах за межами школи, б) вимір довіри виявився тим, який не був посилений так сильно, як інші виміри соціального капіталу, і мав гендерні особливості, в) спостерігалося встановлення соціальної ізоляції через особливі характеристики індивідів.*

*Ключові слова: соціальний капітал; учні початкової школи; соціальні мережі; довіра; дружба; маргіналізація.*