Exploring Social Capital at School: A Framework for Measuring Networks, Trust, and Prosociality

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Abstract
This study introduces an innovative methodology for measuring social capital among students, with the aim of examining its variations across different territorial contexts. The proposed model is grounded in a multidimensional perspective of social capital, structural, normative, and cognitive, and employs three integrated tools: a questionnaire, a sociometric mapping, and age-appropriate economic games. The research involved more than 300 students, aged 9 to 12, from five Sicilian municipalities characterized by diverse socioeconomic and cultural profiles. Although the analysis of the data has not yet been carried out, the study provides a solid methodological framework to explore how social networks, trust relationships, and prosocial preferences develop and differ depending on the life context and the school environment. In this way, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of social capital as a relational and value-based resource, fostering social cohesion, educational inclusion, and civic participation in both school and territorial settings.

Keywords: Social Capital, School, Social Preferences, Economic Games, Students

1. Social Capital: Origins, Definitions, and Theoretical Frameworks

The concept of social capital is among the most fascinating and, at the same time, elusive in the field of social sciences. Its strength lies in its ability to describe and explain collective phenomena through the invisible web of human relationships, shared values, and networks of trust. However, precisely this semantic richness has contributed to a certain theoretical ambiguity that still surrounds the term today. Despite the many existing definitions, it is possible to identify some common conceptual cores, which have emerged thanks to the contributions of various authors over time [1].

In recent decades, the concept of social capital has gained increasing relevance in sociological and economic studies, becoming central to understanding relational dynamics within communities and institutions. In the educational context, this concept acquires particular significance, as the relationships between students, teachers, families, and educational staff constitute a fundamental network for promoting positive, inclusive learning environments oriented toward collective well-being [1].

The renewed attention to social capital is rooted in the studies of prominent scholars such as Robert Putnam, James Coleman, Francis Fukuyama, and Pierre Bourdieu. These scholars generated growing interest among sociologists and economists in the 1980s and 1990s, but the concept of "social capital" has a history of over a century. Its first appearance dates back to 1916, when Lyda Hanifan, a school inspector in West Virginia, defined social capital as:

"The tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit. The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself. If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of

living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors" [2].

Hanifan referred to social capital as the social networks that emerge within urban environments [3].

A first conceptual formulation is attributed to the French thinker Pierre Bourdieu in the 1960s. However, it was James Coleman who developed a complete theory of social capital, followed by Robert Putnam, whose research projected the concept on a global scale by examining institutional performance in Italian regions and the decline of civic engagement in the United States [4-6]. Despite these advances, the controversial nature of the concept persists, reflecting the inherent complexity and dynamism of a community's social structure. Social capital, by its nature, emerges as a multidimensional and composite phenomenon, requiring a critical analysis of the various definitions proposed in the literature [7].

Therefore, understanding and defining social capital is not only a matter of identifying and describing its multiple components. A primary approach is to critically analyze the main definitions proposed in the literature. A suitable starting point, consistent with the historical development of the concept, can be found in Bourdieu's definition, which describes social capital 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" [8].

From this perspective, the amount of social capital an individual possesses is determined by the social connections they can develop and activate through access to other types of resources. Bourdieu associates social capital with a series of social ties and the totality of resources of various kinds that flow through them.

Putnam et al. define social capital as:

"The set of features of social organization, such as trust, solidarity, tolerance, customs, norms of reciprocity, and networks of civic engagement that can increase the efficiency of society by facilitating coordination of individual actions and collective action" [5].

This definition links social capital to horizontal social networks, associated with behavioral norms [9]. Two essential dimensions emerge: one more abstract, concerning norms that govern social coexistence, such as trust, solidarity, tolerance, and civic engagement; and another more formal, considering aspects such as associational life or social networks. In this context, altruism plays an important role and, according to Putnam, manifests in the following way:

"People who give blood, give money, and have volunteered their time are people who are more connected. By far the best predictor of philanthropy, for example, is not how much money you have, but how many clubs you go to or how often you go to church. There is a very strong affinity between social connectedness and altruism" [10].

Another key contribution to clarifying the nature of social capital comes from Coleman, in Foundations of Social Theory, who defines social capital based on two characteristics:

"Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of a social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure" [4].

Coleman's first characteristic focuses on the structural aspect of the concept, explicitly referring to horizontal organizations without specifying the type of relational structure that characterizes social capital. This broad view allows nearly every form of organization and collaboration within a community to be included in the definition of social capital. The second condition highlights a fundamental element of a social structure to qualify as capital: it must facilitate the actions of individuals within it to achieve specific goals.

Fukuyama conceives social capital as *"shared norms or values that promote social cooperation, embedded in actual social relationships"* [11]. From this perspective, culture is also considered as a set of shared norms that promote collective action. Fukuyama's view of social capital primarily focuses on the means through which social relationships are regulated, such as norms, values, culture, and shared ideologies.

Onyx and Bullen identify five recurring dimensions in the literature on social capital [12]. First, it is closely linked to the presence of social networks, which take the form of horizontal associations between individuals or groups and vary in intensity and density. The second element is reciprocity, understood as the expectation of an exchange of services or favors, both in the short and long term. The third dimension concerns trust, which implies a willingness to take social risks based on the expectation that others will act reliably (p. 24) [12]. The fourth dimension involves social norms, i.e., shared values, often implicit, that regulate daily behaviors and interactions. Finally, the sense of personal and collective efficacy emerges as the capacity and willingness of citizens to actively engage in their community (p. 25) [12]. Although these dimensions constitute common elements of social capital, they are distributed unevenly across different contexts.

In a theoretical review, Woolcock and Narayan propose four main interpretative perspectives on social capital: communitarian, network, institutional, and synergistic [13]. The communitarian perspective views social capital as an inherently positive entity, asserting a direct relationship between the amount of social capital in a community and collective wellbeing. It particularly

emphasizes *bonding* social capital, which is based on interpersonal solidarity developed among homogeneous individuals oriented toward common goals [14-16].

The network perspective offers a more nuanced view of social capital by including both horizontal and vertical ties between individuals and organizations. In this approach, bonding capital consists of strong ties within the community, which reinforce identity and the sense of belonging. Bridging capital, on the other hand, is represented by weaker ties between heterogeneous groups that cross religious, economic, ethnic, and generational boundaries [15]. According to this model, economic and social development occurs in the transition from bonding networks, which help individuals "survive" through local resources, to bridging networks, which allow them to "thrive" by accessing skills and resources outside their immediate community [17].

The institutional perspective considers social capital as a dependent variable, whose development depends on the political, normative, and institutional context. Unlike the previous approaches, which treat it as an autonomous cause, this view emphasizes the influence of formal structures on civic behavior. For example, Knack and Keefer note that participation in formal or informal associations can strengthen trust and cooperation, conditions necessary for economic development [18].

Finally, the synergistic perspective seeks to integrate the network and institutional approaches, emphasizing the concept of complementarity, i.e., mutually supportive relationships among social and institutional actors, and *embeddedness*, which indicates the quality and depth of social ties [17].

All the definitions of social capital cited, in one form or another, involve social networks. They address, implicitly or explicitly, the social structure of a community. Moreover, all of them associate social capital, more or less directly, with the mental and cognitive mechanisms that regulate coexistence and interaction among individuals, such as shared norms and values.

The plurality of definitions in the literature highlights a sufficiently well-defined theoretical framework in which social capital can be analyzed through a multidimensional construct. For this purpose, the present study adopts a tripartite division of social capital dimensions, distinguishing among structural, normative, and cognitive dimensions [19,20].

The structural dimension refers to the set of social networks that an individual can activate to access material or symbolic resources. These networks include both strong ties, such as those with family and friends, and weak ties, such as those formed in educational, work, or community contexts. Networks are not only vehicles for information and support but also spaces where a sense of belonging, identity, and mutual recognition is built. They can be analyzed in terms of density, reciprocity, centrality of actors, and the degree of closure or openness of the network. As Coleman observes, the presence of closed relationships within a group can foster trust and

social control, whereas the presence of heterogeneous and open ties, as emphasized by Granovetter, can stimulate innovation and access to new resources [4,21].

The normative dimension, on the other hand, encompasses the set of rules, customs, and expectations that guide individuals' behavior within social networks. It serves a regulatory function, manifested through formal and informal norms, ritualized practices, moral codes, and shared cultural models. From this perspective, elements such as trust, reciprocity, and solidarity play a central role in regulating social interaction. Coleman defines social capital as a collection of different entities united by the presence of structural elements that facilitate individuals' actions, highlighting how social norms directly influence individual choices [4]. Putnamemphasizes how norms of reciprocity and civic networks can increase societal efficiency by coordinating collective action and strengthening civic capital [5]. Trust, in particular, emerges as a cognitive-emotional mechanism that reduces uncertainty in social relationships, enabling cooperation even in the absence of explicit guarantees.

The cognitive dimension, finally, refers to the individual perception of shared norms and values, as well as the common understanding of social reality that develops within communities. It includes beliefs, expectations, and subjective interpretations of others' behavior and the social context, playing a crucial role in the construction of collective intentionality and the legitimacy of social institutions. The cognitive dimension is expressed through language, symbols, educational systems, and collective narratives. Fukuyama highlighted how culture, understood as a set of shared norms and values, constitutes a fundamental medium through which people communicate, negotiate meanings, and cooperate to achieve common goals [22]. In the school context, the cognitive dimension of social capital is reflected in the sharing of educational expectations, the processes of identification with the values promoted by the institution, and the sense of belonging to the class group or school community.

The integration of these three dimensions allows for an understanding of how social capital functions as a mechanism of social regulation and as a resource for individual and collective development. Only an integrated analysis of these components can capture the complexity of social capital and inform the design of effective strategies for its promotion in educational contexts. Schools, as normative, relational, and cognitive environments, represent privileged spaces for observing and fostering social capital, acting as catalysts for trust-building, cooperative exchanges, and the construction of shared meanings.

2. Social Capital in Schools and Social Preferences

The reflections presented above highlight the intrinsic complexity of the concept of social capital. It emerges as a phenomenon imbued with multiple facets and meanings, making it a challenging and nuanced object of study. Although it represents an extraordinarily relevant reality in the context of economic and social dynamics, addressing social capital requires effective measurement to

transform the concept from mere theorization into an operational tool [1].

The school environment represents a crucial context not only for students' cognitive development but also for the formation of their prosocial preferences and value systems. From this perspective, social capital assumes a dual role: on one hand, it functions as a relational resource available to individuals, and on the other, as a collective mechanism of social and cultural regulation. The relationships developed among students, teachers, and families create a social fabric through which not only information and support circulate, but also norms, expectations, and value orientations [6, 23, 24].

Traditionally, research on social capital in educational settings has focused primarily on its impact on academic achievement, behavioral adaptation, and educational success trajectories [25-27]. These studies have shown that relational networks among peers, teachers, and parents, reinforced by trust and reciprocity, are predictive of higher academic outcomes and a lower incidence of behavioral problems. However, this approach risks reducing the function of social capital to a mere instrumental lever for achieving educational results, overlooking its transformative potential in shaping social preferences and shared values.

This contribution departs from that perspective, proposing an approach that considers social capital as an essential component of students' life contexts, shaped by the environments in which they grow up, their families, friendship networks, and broader community ties. From this viewpoint, social capital is analyzed as a generative factor for prosocial preferences, such as altruism, trust, solidarity, and cooperation, that develop far beyond the boundaries of the school setting, yet profoundly influence the way individuals relate to one another within the school.

The study by Van Rossem et al. highlights that social capital in school contexts develops through everyday, often unconscious interactions, which serve as the substrate for the dissemination of informal norms and the construction of a cohesive classroom climate [28]. Peer networks, far from being simple channels for functional exchange, carry meanings and moral orientations: within them, collective judgments are formed about behaviors considered desirable or deviant, shared expectations are established, and forms of cooperation or exclusion are legitimized. In this sense, trust, reciprocity, and altruism are not only structural elements of social capital but also expressions of social preferences rooted in a supportive and "relationally dense" educational environment.

Social preferences, understood as dispositions to favor equitable, cooperative, and solidaristic outcomes, even at the expense of individual self-interest, emerge within school networks as a result of repeated interactions and the quality of the relational climate. They manifest, for example, in students' willingness to help classmates in difficulty, the prioritization of collaboration over competition, and the stigmatization of opportunistic or selfish behaviors. In classrooms characterized by a high level of social cohesion, such

preferences are more widespread and stable, contributing to the construction of an educational environment focused on collective well-being and shared responsibility [1, 29].

However, it is crucial to recognize that neither the distribution of social capital nor the formation of social preferences within the school environment are neutral processes or uniformly accessible to all students. Sociological literature has widely highlighted how access to relational and symbolic resources offered by social capital is strongly influenced by individuals' social positions and the stratification mechanisms that also permeate educational spaces [30,31]. In particular, phenomena such as homophily, the tendency of individuals to form ties with others who share similar characteristics in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, or cultural habits, and formal or informal selection mechanisms within schools (such as tracking, streaming by academic performance, or exclusive friendship networks) can act as barriers to social inclusion.

Consequently, school networks are not merely places of spontaneous encounters; they follow specific rules related to access, proximity, and recognition, which may advantage some groups while marginalizing others. In this context, social capital can have dual effects: on one hand, it can help integrate and strengthen individuals, especially when networks are open and built on trust among diverse participants; on the other hand, it can reinforce inequalities, consolidating the advantages of those who already possess greater cultural, economic, or symbolic resources [32].

Similarly, the social preferences that develop in a given educational context do not reflect exclusively individual traits or innate predispositions but are the outcome of social and cultural processes deeply influenced by the organization and composition of school relationships. Values such as cooperation, solidarity, and inclusion can be either supported or inhibited depending on the relational climate within the classroom, the structure of friendship networks, the type of teacher leadership, and the implicit norms regulating daily behavior [32].

In light of these considerations, the present study aims to move beyond the traditional approach that links social capital exclusively to academic achievement and students' behavioral adaptation. These outcomes, often understood merely as compliance with school rules, proper interaction with peers and adults, and active participation in school life, are here reinterpreted as deeper processes related to the quality of relationships and the formation of shared values [32].

From this perspective, social capital is not only a functional resource but also a factor that fosters the development of prosocial preferences, such as trust, altruism, and cooperation, that influence the ways students behave and interact. The study thus proposes a methodology capable of capturing the value-based and relational dimensions of social capital, taking into account the influence of growth contexts, family, friendships, and community on students'

behavior and relational choices.

The study is based on the hypothesis that an individual's social capital is not constructed exclusively within the school environment but is strongly influenced by the place in which they grow up, their family of origin, parental networks, and friendships formed in early life. For this reason, the investigation was conducted across different territorial contexts in Sicily, characterized by significant socio-demographic heterogeneity. This approach allowed for a comparison of school realities located in both urban and rural areas, with varying levels of cultural, economic, and social capital, in order to understand the extent to which starting conditions and relational configurations influence the availability and quality of social capital, mapping inequalities in social capital across territories.

3. Methodology
Focusing specifically on the egocentric perspective, that is, from the individual's point of view, where social capital is conceptualized as the set of direct relational resources (relationships the individual has with others) and indirect resources (direct relationships of the individuals to whom the subject is connected), this study concentrates on the complex challenge of defining a clear and robust methodology to quantify social capital within educational institutions. In particular, trust, reciprocity, and altruism were analyzed as proxies for social capital [1].

To measure social capital, three complementary instruments were used: a self-assessment questionnaire, a sociometric evaluation, and three economic games. The questionnaire was constructed using a 5-point Likert scale, chosen for its ability to provide structured and comparable quantitative data capable of systematically capturing individual perceptions of trust, reciprocity, and prosocial orientation. The questionnaire, validated based on international instruments and adapted to the school context, was divided into three sections: general information (age, gender, family composition, parental occupation), indicators of subjective well-being inspired by the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB), and assessment of prosocial and altruistic behaviors [33,34].

The core section analyzed key relational contexts (family, school, friends, neighborhood), exploring perceived trust, sense of safety, responsibility, and life satisfaction. Sample statements included: "I trust my family/schoolmates," "If I have a problem, my family will help me," "I feel safe at school," or "At school I have the opportunity to make decisions about things that are important to me" [35-37]. To assess altruism, students were asked to report the frequency of general prosocial behaviors, such as "I share things I like with my friends" or "I try to comfort others."

Alongside this instrument, a sociometric evaluation was implemented in which students identified three classmates considered reliable, helpful, or capable of managing conflicts. This allows the mapping of relational networks within classrooms, identifying central and peripheral nodes, useful for subsequent analyses of social capital distribution and inclusion [35].

The third component of the methodology involved three economic games: the Ultimatum Game, the Trust Game, and the Public Good Game, set within "magical" narrative scenarios involving symbolic exchanges of "gems." These games, widely used in behavioral economics, were adapted for educational purposes to analyze trust, altruism, cooperation, and collective responsibility in a playful context. Decisions made by students in these games allowed observation of trust and reciprocity dynamics (e.g., donating gems without certainty of return), perceived fairness (rejecting offers deemed unfair), and sense of group responsibility (contribution to the "magic well" in the Public Good Game).

The study sample comprised 331 students, of whom 161 were female and 170 male, aged 9 to 12 years, attending primary and lower secondary school classes, distributed across five significantly different territorial contexts in Sicily in terms of demographic, economic, and cultural structure. The selected municipalities represent a variety of social configurations: from low-density rural centers with strong community cohesion to urban areas characterized by higher levels of fragmentation and relational complexity.

Data were collected anonymously using alphanumeric codes, with prior written authorization from parents or legal guardians, as approved by the Ethics Committee Palermo 1 of the "Paolo Giaccone" University Hospital.

Specifically, the sample included the ICS "Emanuele Armaforte" in Altofonte, with 73 students (41 female and 32 male), a small hillside town near Palermo, maintaining a sociorelational structure strongly rooted in extended family networks and local communities, typical of Sicilian inland areas. The ICS "S. Boccone" in Palermo, with 53 students (25 female and 28 male), represents a densely populated urban area located between the central station and Via Oreto, characterized by some socioeconomic vulnerability and a heterogeneous social composition. The ICS "Maestro L. Panepinto" in Bivona and Santo Stefano Quisquina, with 46 (19 female and 27 male) and 62 students (32 female and 30 male), respectively, are two small mountainous towns in the Agrigento hinterland, affected by depopulation and an economy mainly based on agriculture, yet with a strong territorial identity and cohesive social fabric. Finally, the ICS "Borsellino-Ajello" in Mazara del Vallo, with 97 students (44 female and 53 male), is a city in the province of Trapani with a significant population of Tunisian origin. In this context, the school hosts numerous foreign students, including second- and third-generation, who still experience forms of exclusion and limited integration into informal local networks.

At present, the data collection phase has been completed, while quantitative and qualitative analyses have not yet begun. The aim of this preliminary research phase was to construct a solid and replicable methodological framework capable of capturing variations in social capital in relation to territorial context, family composition, the quality of informal social networks, and

the social position of individuals. In a subsequent phase, data analysis will allow empirical exploration of how social capital is distributed across the studied municipalities, which structural and cultural factors influence its formation, and the extent to which these networks can foster the dissemination of prosocial values and behaviors in school and community settings.

Particular attention will be given to the distinction between bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Understanding the extent to which students and school contexts activate social capital primarily based on strong or weak intergroup ties will be crucial to assess the inclusive and transformative potential of relational networks, especially in contexts of high social complexity or characterized by migratory dynamics, as in the case of the Boccone school in Palermo or Mazara del Vallo.

4 .Conclusions

This contribution proposes an innovative and replicable methodology for measuring social capital in school settings, aiming to explore territorial and relational differences across various municipal contexts through the direct involvement of students. The adopted approach integrates quantitative and qualitative tools, such as questionnaires, sociograms, and economic games, capable of capturing not only the presence of relational networks but also the quality of prosocial preferences that emerge in different educational environments.

This preliminary phase of the work focused on the design and implementation of a robust methodological framework able to capture the structural, normative, and cognitive dimensions of social capital, without yet proceeding to the analysis of the collected data. In this sense, the contribution serves as a theoretical and operational foundation for future empirical investigations, offering a measurement model that can be used to compare social capital endowments across territories and to better understand the dynamics of cohesion, inclusion, and participation within schools.

The originality of the proposal lies in recognizing the school not only as a place of formal learning but also as a privileged social space for observing social capital. The use of instruments suitable for a young target group, such as narrative games and sociometric surveys, allowed the dimensions of trust, cooperation, and altruism to be captured sensitively and accessibly.

Although data analysis is still ongoing, the collected materials open promising perspectives for investigating how territorial and family conditions influence the availability and quality of students' social networks. In particular, attention to the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital may prove crucial for assessing the inclusive capacity of schools in contexts characterized by cultural heterogeneity or social vulnerability.

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