Generating social capital between people management and dynamic change

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Abstract

This article presents an action-research experience as an emblematic expression of new ways of generating value and organizational processes. The subject is related to the management of pre-schools, in which civil society takes responsibility for micro-processes that guarantee the generation of collective value for the community and the maintenance of a connective tissue through which narratives, stories, and experiences take root. Stories become relationships, networks of trust and collaboration with widespread availability that translates civic consciousness into actions, initiatives, and projects.

The article's contribution illustrates the challenges faced and the organizational processes activated with the different stakeholders involved in the system of activities considered, through a situated and conversational research-action approach (Shotter 2007), according to a dialogic research-action perspective (Shotter 2010). The results highlight the elements of social capital generated, as well as the critical issues that emerged in the work within the socio-organizational and community contexts.

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Introduction

This contribution describes a process of situated and conversational action research (Shotter 2010) aimed at generating social capital by investigating processes and practices of communication and social participation among the actors of a network system of pre-schools. The experience presented can be considered one of many emblematic examples of the complexity of today's organizational and social contexts, in which it is necessary to co-construct dialogical and relational processes useful for crossing and sustaining the dramatic and difficult changes that our social, civil, geopolitical, economic, productive, and historical coexistences are experiencing.

The paper is developed by initially recalling the theoretical and epistemological anchorages on which the experience described is based. The main characteristics of the context, the cognitive questions assumed, and the methodology adopted are then outlined. Finally, the results achieved are presented and discussed, and suggestions for future research are set out.

The possibility of being a resource in the multifaceted context of childhood education, nurturing an authentic strategy of building a new social coexistence, is based on certain anchorages and basic assumptions that we present below.

The aim of this study is to demonstrate the effectiveness of an action research process in generating situated and contextual knowledge that can provide rich and diverse insights for promoting learning and transforming work practices within a complex organizational setting characterized by a multiplicity of stakeholders.

The first anchorage refers to the adoption of a socio-constructionist epistemology and a gnoseology that represents knowledge as the outcome of participatory construction. We can identify as a synthetic figure of this approach the distinction/conjunction between knowledge understood as a possession and as a product, deposited in disciplinary knowledge and symbolic-cultural elaborations, and knowledge in the sense of knowing as a process and dynamic use (Lanzara 1999) within a field of meanings that is activated within a system of activities (Engeström 2009). The perspective is that of an abductive thought aimed at interpreting situations, activating a

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"circumstantial work" (Ginzburg 1979; Zanarini 1992) of listening to reality and dialogical construction of the possible meanings attributed to it, and equipping people to inhabit organizations with a mental disposition oriented towards research and the joint and situated construction of knowledge (Scaratti and Ivaldi 2021; Ivaldi and Scaratti 2019).

The second anchorage resides in the emancipatory and transformative connotation understood as an agreed and concerted space of joint investment in processes of evolution, which are emerging and considered salient by the actors involved (Scaratti 2021).

On the one hand, the transformative emphasis urges the activation of substantial sense-making processes (Weick 1995), raising attention spans and states of alertness to intercept signals of what is happening and developing high resilience to internal and external turbulence. On the other hand, the emancipatory aspect focuses on the need for organizational members to engage in transformative processes and adopt agile, ad hoc work models in response to changing scenarios (Mintzberg 2009).

The third anchorage concerns the perspective related to the generation of social capital, of which the organization under study here is an emblematic interpreter and witness (Testa, Ferrai, and Scaratti, forthcoming). A recurrent definition of the concept of social capital identifies it as a set of the various relational networks, characterized by dimensions of trust, cooperation, and civic awareness, which characterize socio-organizational and community aggregates (Lin 2017). The construct of social capital has been used to analyse various social phenomena, including economic relationships (Granovetter 1973), institutional interactions (Putnam 1993), and trust in social relations (Fukuyama 1995).

Given the plasticity of the concept, and the debate still open in the scientific community on its role in the production and reproduction of forms of sociality at various levels, it is possible to converge on a configuration of the construct of social capital as a situational and dynamic concept, enhancing its relational nature about the multiple social dynamics it supports. Interesting in this regard is the distinction between the social capital of solidarity, which is more linked to networks in tightly knit groups, and the social capital of reciprocity, which is connected to specific intentions shared by actors linked by weak ties between them. The intertwining of these

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plural resources of networks of relations can generate the possibility for local actors to influence the development of an area in terms of positive qualification. In this case, the set of knowledge and specializations present in an area prevail over mere interests and cost advantages linked to the location of external initiatives.

This connection, however, is not taken for granted, given that the impact of social capital can also be negative, fuelling clientelism, political dependence, or even forms of corruption, such as in mafia situations strongly sustained by particularistic ties and networks of family, kin, and clan relations.There are two risks to be considered (and avoided) in the consideration of the potentially positive role that the cooperative and fiduciary dimensions, typical of social capital, can play in the development of a territorial community. On the one hand, the underestimation of the political and institutional factors that can influence (facilitating or hindering) the rooting of a local connective and relational fabric, and on the other hand, the possible particularistic drift of relational networks, exposed to the temptation of opportunistic/electoral/clientelistic declinations of trust and collaborative resources.

Considering these risks implies the possibility of using the construct of social capital in a dynamic perspective, highlighting the political-institutional conditions of economic-organizational support, of participatory processes to be triggered, which constitute indispensable elements for releasing the generativity of social capital, and reducing/eliminating the dangers of political opportunism, robbery, and predation that conceal the possibility of existing social networks functioning as a resource for local development. The federative and connecting role between the different local contexts, engaged in the development of educational projects in the various territorial communities, represents a balancing factor between public resources, the market, and the third sector in the configuration of different networks between collective subjects, according to a logic that Minztberg (2009) defined as integration between three Ps: public, private, and plural.

The context
The case study presented below was carried out in a federated context of pre-schools in a Northern Italian region, involving some thirty realities, each managed by an autonomous body, associated

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to a network system supported by a second-level body that offers associated school coordination services, school management, staff training, and fiscal, accounting, and legal assistance. In each pre-school, the following operate: the institutional roles of presidents and members of the managing body (voted by the parents); coordinators, trainers, and researchers belonging to the federal body; teachers and auxiliary staff; and the parents of the children attending the schools.

The schools are aggregated into circles according to an aggregation that emphasizes geographical affinities in their territorial location.

The intervention was carried out between the years 2020 and 2022 and involved the various actors mentioned above. The managing body is responsible for the overall functioning of the school (economic, organizational, and logistical); it is supported by the second-level body (the federation of schools) and is elected every four years by the assembly of parents belonging to the school.

Methodological aspects

The pathway described here began with a discussion on the dynamics and practices of communication between schools and families, using a participatory reflection among the various players in the school system under study: teachers, coordinators, presidents, trainers, and parents. The main questions that generated and produced the research action are as follows:

- How do parents of children in pre-school perceive the way pre-school teachers work?
- What representations have been formed and which ones are circulating most about the didactic-educational approach in use, which sees at the centre of learning the interaction between children and their social-relational agency?
- In terms of these aspects, what are the teachers' representations of what parents think and experience concerning their proposals as professional adults?
- Regarding the teachers' representations of what parents think and experience towards them, in which situations are they congruent and when are they less so or distorted?
- What are the most commonly used communication strategies to address these issues?

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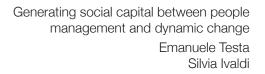management and dynamic change
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From these questions, the action-research work commenced, using various qualitative devices according to the following sequence of steps:

- Identification of four organizational actors to be involved in the action-research process: parents, teachers, auxiliary staff, and members of the governing bodies.
- Establishment of 16 focus groups, each with eight participants, involving at least one person from each pre-school, with groups distinctly formed for each type of interlocutor in the life of the schools, thus favouring the co-construction of narratives between homogeneous actors. These 16 focus groups were created by selecting participants from their respective organizations, with one participant representing each pre-school. Gender diversity was ensured within each focus group, while maintaining homogeneous roles: four focus groups were comprised exclusively of teachers, four of parents, four of support staff, and four of members of the managing bodies. This approach aimed to promote discussion among individuals with similar roles and to facilitate a comparative analysis of the narratives produced across different roles.
- Creation of eight focus groups, each composed of eight participants, involving the different actors jointly in them, thus favouring the co-construction of narratives between heterogeneous actors. Each of these eight focus groups was conducted within a pre-school, bringing together participants with different roles in the same focus group. This design aimed to encourage narrative production among individuals from the same organization while fostering diverse perspectives within each group. The focus group method was chosen as a research tool since it facilitates knowledge production through anchoring the participants in real situations and, thus, is situated and contextual. This approach encourages diverse perspectives during discussions and in the analysis phase by comparing the outcomes of each group. Each focus group was conducted by two researchers, one serving as the facilitator and the other as an observer and note-taker, using the same set of questions for each session.

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- Transcription of the focus group narratives, audio-recorded during the focus groups, and a first level of content analysis of the materials.
- First thematic analysis of what emerged from the focus groups and critical elaboration by one researcher and four coordinators. The thematic analysis was conducted as follows: Each of the two researchers individually examined the complete set of written texts generated from the focus groups, and the same analysis was conducted separately by the four coordinators. Subsequently, the six individuals shared the results of their individual findings to converge into a collective outcome.
- Restitution, interpretation, and validation of what emerged by the research team with each group met for the focus groups.
- Involvement, in some available schools, of some children for a small group discussion on some action-research objects, which became the object of further reflection and in-depth study.
- Sharing of what emerged in the focus groups with about 180 pre-school teachers involved in the action-research work and an indication of improvement trajectories concerning communication practices between schools and families.
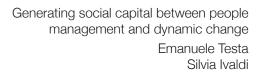
Results and Discussion

The material produced during the focus groups allowed for a consistent and articulated variety of cognitive elements (Testa and Scaratti, forthcoming), of which we report in this contribution only three of the main outcomes acquired through the work carried out.

A) The register of listening and the use of language

A first outcome concerns the register of listening and the consequent use of language in the communicative processes between teachers and parents: the importance of engaging in reciprocal listening through clear and explicit language constitutes an essential element, without which not only the focus of the school's didactic-educational proposal seems to be compromised but also the professional and scientific intentionality that sustains some of the teachers' approach choices. Two aspects seem to be particularly important in this respect:

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- The use of a vocabulary concerning epistemological and methodological aspects of didactic-educational choices, capable of conveying concepts that are accessible to those who are not "insiders" as they do not belong to professional school and learning communities, as is the case for most parents. An interesting element of this emerged in one of the focus groups with parents, from which the following narrative sequence is extrapolated:

  Parent: "When you present to parents at the beginning of the year—especially during assemblies—it's crucial to consider the way you tell the stories. Not all parents have the same ability to understand and perceive what is happening within the school. Therefore, in certain types of presentations, the ability to convey complex concepts is essential."

- The need to make the most of formal contexts, such as meetings and interviews with parents, and of occasional spaces of discussion, more characterized by informal modes, such as those at the children's entrance to the school and at the exit when parents and teachers meet at the end of the school day. It emerged that these situations constitute valuable moments to nurture a narrative continuity between the actors involved, although it should be noted that the informality of these verbal exchanges does not allow entry into more complex content concerning the concept of the child, the pedagogical approach at the school, and events in the school community.

B) The register of seeing and its related communication channels
A second aspect that emerged from the focus groups as distinctive for fostering communication processes between schools and families concerns the register of seeing and the related different communication channels that are used in the context under study. Here, there is a particularly relevant reference to visual artefacts, such as videos showing sequences of schoolwork activities between the children and with the teachers. In addition to the videos in the focus groups, the communicative effectiveness of the documentation displayed at school is repeatedly emphasized, in which, alongside transcripts of conversations between children and teachers, sequences of explanatory images are shown that facilitate parents' understanding of the didactic-educational activities being described.

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Here are some transcripts of what emerged in the focus groups with parents:

Parent A: "Seeing how children experience what [the teachers design] for them, this is for us [parents] easier to absorb because let's face it, it's not like all parents know about education or child psychology. [The videos help them to understand] how their child experiences what [the teachers propose] and so through that it is easier to absorb also what is the (...) educational project for the children."

Parent B: "It was interesting the photo exhibition that was held, so the children would take home an album with photos, drawings made by them. In that way, my child also explained to us what she had done during the day and the various projects."

The use of video recordings, as emerged in the focus groups, is also effective when their use takes place during meetings with parents, as explained in the following narrative sequence extrapolated from a focus group with parents:

Parent A: "[...] I appreciated the clear manner of the teachers' explanations and seeing the pictures of the children during the activities: seeing my daughter integrated in the group and interacting."

Parent B: "[...] Seeing what our children do allows us some involvement."

Parent C: "[...] I really appreciated that there was material regarding the children's activities (photos, videos) and the sharing of videos where we could see the school dynamics between children and between children and teachers."

Parent D: "[...] It was also very interesting to visit the section."

Parent E: "[...] It is very nice to see the children involved and attentive to what they have to do."

Based on what emerged from the focus groups with the teachers, for them, too, the use of visual channels constitutes a mode that fosters understanding and communication, as can be seen in the conversational cross-section below:

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Teacher A: "When you have meetings accompanied by PowerPoint, videos, and photos where parents see their children perhaps in action, it is certainly more engaging than the meeting where you just read or explain the annual plan. That gets boring after a while."

Teacher B: "There, yes, I would say that is true. A parent who sees the PowerPoint where his or her child is also, then goes away happy because they say that even the documentation that is displayed [at school] they can read it with different eyes. They can understand because they have seen experiences that the children have with our explanations."

C) Living/making living an experience that helps in understanding

The third element that emerged from the focus groups concerns the register of living/making living and refers to a promising practice that is particularly effective in helping parents to understand the didactic-educational choices of the federated system of pre-schools and, thus, the teachers' didactic-educational work with the children. It refers to meetings between teachers and parents in which the latter are invited to activities that are carried out at the school. This allows them to experience first-hand what happens in the didactic-educational work. The school system under consideration is characterized by epistemological and methodological choices of a socio-constructivist approach, from which the activities of the children in school in small groups is emphasized in order to encourage their active participation in the co-construction of narratives and actions. In some pre-schools, this same activity was proposed to parents and, according to the findings of the action-research, it proved to be particularly effective for parental communication. The qualifying and indispensable aspect, in this respect, turns out to be the meta-reflection work on the experience carried out between parents in small groups, accompanied by the teachers through the highlighting of what happened between parents and the relationship of this with the school context. Here are some narrative insights into what emerged in a focus group with teachers:

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Teacher A: "Last year, parents came into the classroom and one evening (…) we divided the parents into small groups (…)."

Teacher B: "The parents were a little bit puzzled when they realized that there was a pencil on the table, that there was glue, that there was material only, really, for one person, OK? And that's when we explained that they had to be able to talk to each other. They had to be able to agree."

Teacher A: "Then we made documentation, just through photos and writing, and also to put outside in the hall, for everyone, even the others, those who unfortunately could not come (…)."

Teacher B: "And, in comparison (…) of what are the face-to-face meetings (…) there was really a large participation that we did not expect."

Conclusions

The research-action presented here activated participatory movements and transformative micro-processes within the various contexts involved concerning the work objects investigated, highlighting a relevant coherence between the cognitive objectives of the pathway and the research-action methodology adopted for their acquisition. The reconnaissance of communication and participation practices between schools and families actively mobilized the various actors present in the life of the schools, with important repercussions on the relational level, activating spaces for co-construction and discussion, developing new narratives, and facilitating moments of listening and comparison that nourished the research process itself and the reconfiguration of important aspects of the object under investigation.

The investment of participation in communication and shared educational planning in schools can be considered with all evidence as an emblematic expression of a generation of social capital for two reasons: first, for the experience of reciprocity experienced in the common listening/seeing/experiencing of different intentions that recognize themselves in the common awareness of constituting a resource for the territory; and second, for the dimensions of trust, relationship, cooperation, and responsibility that

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constitute authentic expressions of subsidiarity, belonging, and civic and community awareness.

The practical implications of the findings from this action-research study could include, for example, training programmes aimed at enhancing teachers' communication skills during parent–teacher meetings, as well as implementing innovative systems that utilize visual channels to help parents better understand the school's working methods. Additionally, programmes could focus on strengthening teachers' abilities to conduct effective parent–teacher conferences.

Future research could explore new communication practices developed from the outcomes of the action-research presented in this study. Additionally, the categories identified in the thematic analysis could be investigated further through a quantitative study involving a larger participant sample via questionnaires. While this work provides an in-depth analysis of the studied practices, its limitations relate to the representativeness of the sample.

These precautions also aimed at assessing the risks mentioned in the introduction that an approach like the one adopted may entail, namely the underestimation of political-institutional components and the particularistic drifts that a narrative production may lead to.

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