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VIEWPOINTS/CONTROVERSIES

Social capital in action for strengthening rural schools

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Abstract This article reflects on the connection between education, development, and social capital through the example of a specific type of rural school called Family Education Alternating Cycle Centers (CEFFA, the acronym for Centros Educativos Familiares de Formación en Alternancia). CEFFA schools are based on the concept of a cycle that alternates between learning periods spent in the socio-professional environment of the students and periods spent in school. Driven by family-run associations and other local actors, these schools pursue personal and local development, with a bottom-up approach based on the protagonism of the beneficiaries, especially in rural areas. To achieve this development through education, the schools provide young people with a comprehensive education associated with vocational training and introduce the needs of the territorial context into the curriculum. In this way, they ensure the relevance of learning. This article examines how these schools maintain a strong associative life that is strengthened by the social capital created around them. After defining the school associations, we describe their specific characteristics and some requirements for their adequate functioning. The CEFFA results suggest that we can reimagine a more people-centered education in which families and other community actors are committed to sustainable local development and transformative learning through the use of the power of social capital.

Keywords Rural education and development · Social capital · CEFFA · Alternating cycle education

Among the various governance dimensions of a new social contract for education, capacity building, training, and leadership development are relevant to centering the relationships between people. This can contribute to a new social contract for education organized

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around relational interconnectedness, opening a window to more human approaches focused on establishing connections through educational processes (Toukan, 2023; United Nations, 2021). This article examines how a specific type of rural school called Family Education Alternating Cycle Centers (CEFFA, the acronym for Centros Educativos Familiares de Formación en Alternancia) has a strong associative life that is strengthened by the social capital created around it. The CEFFA results suggest that we can reimagine a more people-centered education in which families and other community actors are committed to sustainable local development and transformative learning through the use of the power of social capital.

Connections through education

Educators must be able to facilitate sustainable connections in all possible directions. Schools can strengthen a community's social fabric and generate social capital (Plagens, 2011). The character of connections in education can be examined on multiple levels. First, and closest to the grassroots setting, education can connect parents, children, and families. Parents have a non-delegable responsibility as their children's first and foremost educators. Along with families, education connects students and teachers. During the pandemic, we were reminded of the importance of face-to-face contact between students and teachers. Beyond academic results and the forced use of technology, there is no doubt about the negative effects of the pandemic on the socio-emotional well-being of both advantaged and disadvantaged students, although the negative impacts have been greatest for disadvantaged populations. Indeed, education is a deeply human and essentially relational act, not a technological one.

Second, education can make connections within a local community, can connect a community to its schools, and can connect schools to the territory through the community. This territory-community connection can be especially evident in rural settings, where it is assumed that schools should be agents of community development, and meaningful connections between school curriculum and the local environment are viewed as desirable. Given that rural children are twice as likely as urban children to drop out of school (UIS, 2012), as a matter of justice, new social contracts for education need to establish relevant connections between curricula and their settings.

However, these connections are not as easy to establish as it may seem. Traditional school systems are often unable to address the specific needs of rural youth, and scholars have documented a predominantly urban focus in many curricula (García-Marirrodriga, 2009, 2011; Xue et al., 2021; Yúnez-Naude & Taylor, 2001). This lack of relevance has immediate effects on the sustainability of rural development. Furthermore, traditional schools often have an imbalance between the education and skills they impart and the limited possibilities for graduates seeking work locally.

Third, education directly addresses the development of each person. An integrated and humanistic approach to education is increasingly relevant in today's world, where sustainability has become a central concern of global development. This approach addresses social, ethical, economic, cultural, civic, and spiritual dimensions (UNESCO, 2015).

The United Nations' 2030 agenda called for a new paradigm centered on the dignity of each person, recognizing extreme poverty as a denial of said dignity. In this framework, development must allow everyone to be an agent of their destiny and to be more (i.e., a

better person), not only to have more. Education is essential for this purpose (UN, 2015). The 2030 agenda is an action plan for people, the planet, and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace and freedom by acting in collaborative partnership. People, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership are known as the 5Ps of the sustainable development goals.

Educational processes must therefore build relationships of care and trust among all the people involved. Educational ecology places the person (i.e., the first of the 5Ps) at the center of all development processes because it is based on human ecology. Finally, education connects the community with the planet (i.e., the second of the 5Ps) and the whole of humanity and our history (UNESCO, 2021). Educating people with a sustainable vision of development does not merely consist of adding environmental topics to the curriculum, it translates into a transdisciplinary approach to problems (UNESCO, 1999) that includes learning from the exchange of opinions and taking into account experience, the affective, and the spiritual (Bachelart, 2002).

CEFFAs: Relevant schools set up by local associations

As a consequence of the lack of relevance of rural education in 1935, in the southwest of France, the first CEFFA, also known as Maison Familiale Rurale (MFR), was founded. It was the fruit of cooperation between several people who, concerned about the education of young people and the future of their rural environment, set up an association to try out a different way of learning and teaching in a new and unique school. Shortly thereafter, this association was legalized and expanded, both in terms of the number of people involved and the profiles of the people. An intense associative life, which arose from implementation of the alternating cycle system, has been a factor in territorial development since the first CEFFA was launched (García-Marirrodriga & De los Ríos, 2005).

Today, in more than the 30 countries of the world where CEFFAs are present—from Brazil to the Philippines, via Cameroon or France—two fundamental principles remain the key to CEFFAs' creation and development: association and alternating cycle pedagogy. The former refers to responsibility for the school's overall management and determines its objectives and legal status. The association's consolidation process lends itself to continuous learning and to the relevant training of the actors involved. The latter principle defines the nature of training associated with the CEFFA. These two principles allow CEFFAs to offer more to their people and communities, beyond being simply a scholastic institution. However, the weaker the relationships are, the more closely the CEFFA will resemble a traditional school (García Marirrodriga, 2009; García-Marirrodriga & Puig-Calvó, 2022). These means of achieving CEFFA's two objectives (i.e., personal development based on a professional project, and local development of the community) also mark the difference from a dual-system approach that focuses on enterprise and does not consider aspects related to development and partnership.

We can say that a CEFFA is an association of families, individuals, and institutions that seeks to solve a common local development problem through training activities, mainly for young people but without excluding adults. The effective connection between education, real needs, work, and territory is clear due to the integrative alternating cycle between the student's socio-professional environment and classroom. This "learning by doing" in work settings and the classroom, and the focus on problems in a transdisciplinary approach,

allows the schools to link the curriculum with their territory. Education through the alternating cycle pedagogical system represents one of the possible responses to the necessity of creating stable and effective connections between education and the world of work (Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development [OCDE], 1994). This connection can be a challenge for educators because it requires specific training (García-Marirrodriga & Gutiérrez-Sierra, 2019).

UNESCO (2015, 2021) and the Secretary General of the United Nations (United Nations, 2021) spoke about the importance of strong civil society organizations and local participation as ingredients for poverty reduction and democratization. Effective development should be participatory (Ackoff, 1984). Even today, it is not easy to find effective participation in many rural areas with little access to education, political tools, and information (Ashley & Maxwell, 2001). At the same time, this involvement is favored in rural settings due to the great social capital of group work and ethics, which is reflected in its association with moral and family values, and the cultivation of solidarity and hospitality (Kliksberg, 2004).

CEFFAs aim for sustainable development, with a bottom-up approach based on the central role of the beneficiaries (García-Marirrodriga, 2011; García-Marirrodriga et al., 2007) in a collective and continued learning process (Cernea, 1991; Rist et al., 2007). Self-management by the community is a core principle (Chacón et al., 2015; USAC-UNESCO-DISOP-AIMFR, 2013).

Three main differences from other types of school associations are as follows. First, the association is composed not only of parents but of other relevant local actors, including alumni and their families, small business owners, members of other associations, entrepreneurial groups or trade unions, local government organizations, municipality officials, local politics, local development agents, and religious and other leaders. Developing a community or growing social capital among individuals without children in school can be an important achievement (Plagens, 2011) that guarantees the right to education by safeguarding the principles of non-discrimination, equal opportunity, and social justice (UNESCO, 2021).

Second, the council of each school has a strong relationship with the teachers so they can build together the most appropriate educational plan for young people, based on the social and environmental context of the school (Chacón et al., 2015). In this way, the school introduces the territory into the curriculum, and the entire learning process is transformed into relevant content, skills, and projects for young people and sustainable development.

Third, the council members have a responsibility for the overall management of the school. The personal commitment of the president of the association's council and the school's principal, as well as their active collaboration, is vital to the proper functioning of decision-making and requires strong shared leadership. As Romanowski (2022) pointed out, leadership is the crucial difference between an effective and an ineffective school. To adequately fulfill their functions and commitments, the members of the associations require specific training. This allows their lifelong learning through nonformal or informal educative actions and a connection to formal education in the same educative ecosystem. The specific training they receive contributes to their empowerment, especially for women who become more prepared to claim their right to education and not to be excluded (United Nations, 2018).

Regional or national networks of CEFFA associations organize training for local actors in leadership and organizational skills. These regional or national pedagogical teams are often in contact with local universities for updating, exchanging relevant experiences, and

networking of learning. Sometimes they have financing from international cooperation through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or other means.

CEFFA associations as creators of social capital

CEFFA and its pedagogical system provide a clear example of mutual benefits as the result of collective action (Uphoff & Wijayaratna, 2000) and reinforce some elements of social capital, which favors the realization of collective actions to benefit the community (Putnam, 1993). To contribute to true development, social capital must include relationships of integration within the community, on the one hand, and a capacity to interact and negotiate with groups external to the community, as well as to look for synergy between institutions, on the other hand. Included in the concept of social capital is the formation of associations, trust, reciprocity, and civic commitment (Coleman, 1998; Narayan, 1999; Putnam, 1993; Uphoff & Wijarayatna, 2000; Woolcock, 1998).

Two principal dimensions are involved with the analysis of a group's social capital. The first refers to how social capital is understood as the specific capacity of a group to mobilize resources, and the second dimension refers to the extent of networks and connections that the group can create and maintain. Three important notions converge in these two dimensions: leadership and empowerment. We can observe the distinction between networks of relationships within a group (*bonding*), networks between similar groups or communities (*bridging*), and networks of external relationships (*linking*), as Woolcock (1998) pointed out. Social capital can exist in a latent form between people or groups that share common characteristics they have not yet discovered (Kliksberg, 2004). The conversion of latent social capital into active social capital requires interactions for these common characteristics to be recognized, including external interventions involving the participation of the community.

In the case of CEFFAs, the assumption of responsibilities in education and local development by the group of families and other people in the association activates social capital. CEFFAs provide formidable contributions to the improvement of the quality of life for youths, their families, and their communities, and they become a laboratory of social capital in action. We see organized community participation (*bonding social capital*), which also incorporates external assets (*bridging* and *linking social capital*) to achieve two common objectives: to provide a better and more relevant education for youths, and to create a series of local development actions stemming from the CEFFA. The creation of social capital by CEFFAs—a capacity that is often overlooked in educational institutions (Narayan, 1999)—facilitates encounters between generations, and exchanges of knowledge and experiences between youths and adults. Beyond a simple parent group around a school, which is common in traditional pedagogic systems, CEFFA's associations must be an authentic pole of local development that uses the school as an instrument of development.

Governance, associativity, and leadership are related concepts, and CEFFA illustrates how this relationship favors a territorial development based on the training of the various actors involved, in addition to the curriculum learned by the students in the school. This curriculum emphasizes interdisciplinary learning that supports students to access and produce knowledge while also developing their capacity to critique and apply it (United Nations, 2021).

Studies in different contexts reinforce these ideas—see for example, the cases of Colombia (García-Marirrodriga & De los Ríos, 2005), Peru (García-Marirrodriga, 2011; García-Marirrodriga et al., 2007; Monge, 2016; Zapata-Esteves & Centurión-Cárdenas, 2023),

Guatemala (USAC-UNESCO-DISOP-AIMFR, 2013), Brazil (Araújo, 2018), and Argentina (Divinsky, 2019). An ambitious study involving 15 countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe is currently underway to update data and broaden their geographical range.

Concluding remarks

In this article, the singularities of a modality of rural schools were described. These schools (i.e., the CEFFAs) are promoted by local family-based associations whose purpose is to guarantee both a relevant education for the youth as well as the development of the territory where they settle. The ability of these associations to create social capital facilitates participation and democracy while strengthening the school itself and enabling a new, more inclusive, and open form of broad-based governance. Education can be considered a social contract—that is, an implicit agreement between the members of a society to cooperate to obtain a common benefit (United Nations, 2021). The CEFFA associations are a benchmark in the creation of social capital in rural areas in line with the theory of social capital (Putnam, 1993; Uphoff & Wijayaratna, 2000; Woolcock, 1998). The presence of committed associations that take responsibility for schools contributes to a renewed social contract.

The CEFFAs have an especially strong presence in rural communities. As associations have become legally recognized, their power has been sustained in the hands of local families (*bonding* social capital). At the same time, they have achieved the integration and commitment of other local actors (especially members of peasant communities, small entrepreneurs, alumni, municipalities, and even local educational authorities), thus *linking* and *bridging* social capital. The greater families' commitment has been to educating young people and developing their territory, the stronger the social capital networks have become. In other words, the greater the social capital in action, the stronger a school will be. Together with this social capital in action, CEFFAs need the empowerment and leadership of their actors. The schools carry out this training, but they also have to work together with public authorities; they need the authorities both for recognition of the diplomas schools award and for financial support. As a matter of social justice, public authorities consider education an affordable public good for the rural population, which is often neglected. If the authorities fail to provide this support, rural communities will be discriminated against again.

Empowering young students in rural areas to carry out sustainable investments is crucial (FAO, 2022). A more people-centered and territorial context for the curriculum can allow the reimagining of transformative learning. Empowering members of associations through specific training improves the quality of social capital in action. The connection between different people and schools also facilitates a more people-centered education in which families and other community actors are committed to sustainable local development by using the power of social capital.

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