

HABILITATION THESIS SUMMARY

Social capital and the transformation of education in the digital era.

Psychosocial perspectives on inclusion, collaboration and community well-being

Introduction – Positioning My Research within the Social Sciences

In this habilitation thesis, I have proposed an interdisciplinary and integrated exploration of social capital as a key concept for understanding contemporary dynamics in education, social inclusion, and digital transformation. Drawing from my academic formation and research trajectory across psychology, social work, and education sciences, I have aimed to combine theoretical modeling with applied inquiry and empirical validation.

Social Capital – The Theoretical Core of My Work

In the interpretative framework I developed throughout this thesis, social capital is approached multidimensionally, encompassing: (1) social support networks, (2) norms and values that guide cooperation and solidarity, and (3) both interpersonal and institutional trust. These dimensions, in my view, are fundamental to the healthy functioning of educational environments and to fostering emotional and social well-being among all participants in the learning process.

My central objective was to demonstrate that social capital acts both as a structural condition and a dynamic resource in building inclusive, supportive, and resilient educational ecosystems. I situated myself within a psychosocial research tradition that acknowledges the interdependence between relationships, values, institutional frameworks, and digital environments in shaping educational well-being.

I have treated social capital not only as a conceptual object of analysis, but also as an evaluative and interventionist criterion. I explored its practical applications in areas such as the formation of learning communities, the development of social presence in digital education, relational counseling strategies, the support of multidisciplinary collaboration, and the facilitation of reflective practice among educational actors.

By adopting this framework, I proposed a reconceptualization of both education and social work: not simply as interventionist fields, but as fertile ground for regenerating social capital—an essential condition for cohesion, collaboration, and well-being in our increasingly digital and fragmented societies.

A Holistic and Systemic Perspective

I grounded my work in a holistic and systemic approach to social capital, in which support networks, social norms, and community values are understood as interrelated components of a broader educational and social ecosystem. I moved beyond individualistic or functionalist interpretations, instead adopting an ecological perspective that locates social relationships within their wider cultural, institutional, and technological contexts.

This systemic paradigm enabled me to integrate three levels of analysis: the **micro** (individual interactions), the **meso** (school and institutional networks), and the **macro** (public policies, social norms, and organizational cultures). From this perspective, I have treated social capital as more than a descriptor of relational well-being; rather, I viewed it as an active, renewable resource, capable of being nurtured through educational innovation, psychosocial support, and community-based initiatives.

I emphasized the role of circular feedback mechanisms—how the emotional well-being of educators influences classroom dynamics, which in turn shape student motivation and academic engagement. These feedback loops, I argued, can generate either virtuous or vicious cycles depending on the availability of support structures. Institutional dimensions such as teacher training, leadership development, and professional counseling are, in my view, critical in preserving social capital in the face of digitalization, social fragmentation, and socio-economic precarity.

Through this holistic lens, I explored social capital as a transversal mechanism that bridges theory and practice: community support, digital inclusion, interdisciplinary collaboration, relational competencies, and the design of educational environments that promote human well-being. These insights, I believe, can inform educational policy, social work practice, and efforts to rebuild resilient, value-driven educational communities.

The First Part - Main Direction Researches

First Research Direction: Social Capital and the Well-being of Educators and Learners in Educational Systems

The first research direction of this thesis examined how social capital impacts well-being, motivation, and engagement within educational settings, both from the perspective of teachers and students. Across a series of empirical studies and theoretical syntheses, I analyzed how trust, relational support, and a sense of belonging functioned as protective factors during periods of change, crisis, and digital transition.

In one key study, I explored the correlations between teacher self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and work engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using instruments such as the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale and the Generic Scale of Job Satisfaction, my

collaborators and I demonstrated that teacher self-efficacy was a significant predictor of both satisfaction and engagement—explaining 30% and 45% of the variance, respectively. These findings underscored, for me, the vital role of interpersonal support and institutional trust—both core dimensions of social capital—in preventing burnout and sustaining professional motivation.

In another study, I focused on students, examining how classroom comfort and faculty support mediated the relationship between cognitive presence and grit. Framed within the Community of Inquiry model, this research showed that cognitive presence alone is insufficient to sustain perseverance. Instead, social and emotional factors such as comfort and perceived support played a significant role, reinforcing my belief that grit is not only an individual trait but also a socially constructed outcome enabled by a capital-rich educational environment.

Second Research Direction: The Impact of Digitalization on Supportive Relationships and Social Cohesion in Education

The second major research direction centered on how the digitalization of education is transforming support systems and social cohesion. I investigated how online environments affect the availability of support, emotional connection, and institutional trust—often in ways that either weaken or reshape the nature of social capital.

Among the key contributions of this section was my study on the technology acceptance behavior of preschool teachers in Romania. Combining the Technology Acceptance Model with neural network analysis (RBF), the findings revealed that perceived usefulness and alignment with teaching values were significant predictors of digital adoption. However, I also identified emotional resistance and the absence of peer support as barriers—especially in early education contexts where human connection is central.

Other research projects addressed cyberbullying through the lens of social capital, analyzing phenomena such as *consent silence*, digital aggression, and empathic disengagement. I interpreted the passive bystander behavior not as neutral, but as an indicator of social disengagement, often driven by status preservation, group conformity, or digital disinhibition. These insights supported the need for programs that cultivate digital empathy and promote digital resilience as collective competencies.

Ultimately, I theorized digital well-being not merely as a matter of screen use or technological adaptation, but as a reflection of social capital resilience—the capacity of educational communities to sustain trust, solidarity, and meaningful connection in virtual contexts.

Third Research Direction: Educational Equity and Inclusion as Components of Social Capital

In the third part of the thesis, I explored the normative and institutional dimensions of social capital through the lens of educational equity and inclusion. I reviewed research on inclusive pedagogy, special educational needs (SEN), trauma-informed education, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 4 on quality education.

A significant contribution was a scoping review on inclusive early childhood education. I identified six critical components for fostering inclusion: child rights recognition, inclusive school cultures, teacher training, adaptable curricula, infrastructure, and strong community engagement. These were conceptualized as structural conditions that shape relational and normative dimensions of social capital in educational systems.

Additional research examined the role of teachers as mediators in crisis situations, the value of non-formal education for vulnerable students, and the implementation of trauma-sensitive approaches to support re-engagement. Across all these studies, I emphasized that inclusion is not merely a moral or policy goal, but a relational mechanism that either enables or constrains the formation of social capital. Schools that exclude also fail to connect, support, and cultivate cooperative behavior.

The theoretical grounding of this section drew on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner), transformative learning (Mezirow), and Schwartz's theory of values—frameworks that allowed me to conceptualize inclusion as a dynamic, psychosocial process embedded in daily interactions and structural configurations.

In *the second part* of this thesis, I reflected on the evolution of my professional and academic journey, highlighting the milestones that shaped my identity as a researcher, educator, and practitioner in the fields of social work, psychology, and education sciences. I presented the continuity and coherence of my academic development, from my doctoral research on value systems and cultural consumption in family settings, to my contributions to national and international research projects, scientific publications, and pedagogical innovation. This section emphasized the integration of my teaching, research, and applied experiences, outlining how each phase of my career has contributed to the articulation of a transdisciplinary approach to social capital, educational equity, and digital transformation. Through my academic and community engagements, I have aimed to bridge theory and practice, contributing not only to knowledge production but also to the development of inclusive and supportive learning environments.

In *the third part* of this thesis, I outlined the future directions of my academic and scientific career, grounded in the thematic and methodological continuity of my previous work. I proposed three major research trajectories: the first focuses on the role of social capital in strengthening resilience and well-being within digital educational communities; the second addresses crisis intervention and the reconstruction of social support networks in social work; and the third investigates educational equity and community-based inclusion through interdisciplinary approaches. These directions are not only theoretical in nature but also closely linked to practical needs observed in education and social services. They reflect my commitment to applied research with social impact, and to developing models and tools that can support professionals, institutions, and vulnerable populations. This part of the thesis demonstrates my intention to continue contributing to the scientific community through meaningful, ethically anchored, and context-sensitive research.

Through a coherent and integrative framework, this habilitation thesis positions *social capital* not only as a theoretical tool, but as a frame for rethinking education, inclusion, and digital transformation. Through my work demonstrates that educational well-being, institutional equity, and digital cohesion are all expressions—and generators—of social capital.