

From Social Capital to Organizational Capacity: Activating Relational Resources for School Innovation

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ABSTRACT

A large body of literature treats social capital, trust, norms, and networks as assets that improve schools. However, many schools rich in relational resources remain slow to adapt and innovate, suggesting that social capital is a potential rather than an automatic outcome. This study examines why some schools convert relational resources into organizational capacity while others do not and develops the concept of social capital activation, namely the process through which school leaders intentionally transform relational resources into collective organizational action. Using a qualitative multiple-case study of two state Islamic senior secondary madrasahs in Lamongan, East Java, and interviews with principals, teachers, staff, students, and parents, four themes emerged: dormant social capital, leadership activation mechanisms, conversion into learning and adaptive capacity, and the dark side of excessive bonding capital. The findings demonstrate that activation, rather than accumulation, turns relationships into organizational power

INTRODUCTION

Modern schools operate under intensifying pressure. Rapid technological change, rising demands for measurable quality, and an increasingly complex web of stakeholders governments, parents, communities, employers have turned the school into a dense organizational arena rather than a simple container for instruction. Faced with these pressures, schools can no longer rely on material resources alone. What they increasingly draw on is a different and less tangible kind of asset: relational resources, the trust, networks and shared understandings that allow the people inside and around the organization to act together. How skilfully a school marshals these relational resources has become as consequential for its development as its budget, its buildings or the formal qualifications of its staff.

Social capital is the concept that captures this asset. In Coleman's (1988, 1990) formulation it is a resource that inheres in the structure of social relations and facilitates the actions of those embedded within it; in Putnam's (1993, 2000) it is the trust, norms and networks that enable coordinated effort toward shared ends; and in Bourdieu's (1986) it is the aggregate of resources accessible through durable networks of mutual acquaintance and recognition. Organizational scholarship later sharpened these ideas, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) distinguished its structural, relational and cognitive dimensions, Lin (2001) recast it as resources embedded in networks that actors access and mobilise, and Adler and Kwon (2002) catalogued its sources, benefits and risks, and education researchers carried it into schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Dika & Singh, 2002; Leana & Pil, 2006). Across this body of work, however, social capital is most often treated as a condition that an organization either possesses or lacks.

Indonesian schools, and madrasahs in particular, make this assumption especially worth scrutinising. Embedded in kinship-style collegiality, religious community and frequently paternalistic leadership, the madrasah is unusually rich in relational resources; it is precisely the kind of organization in which one would expect social capital to translate readily into performance. And yet the translation is far from automatic, which makes such schools an ideal setting in which to ask not whether relational wealth exists, but whether and how it is ever put to work.

Treating social capital as a static condition leaves an awkward fact unexplained. Some schools possess high stocks of trust, warm collegial relations and a strong family culture, and yet remain slow to innovate, weak in adaptive capacity and heavily dependent on the principal for every decision. If social capital automatically produced organizational improvement, such schools should not exist. Their existence implies that something is missing between the relational asset and the organizational outcome a mechanism that determines whether latent relationships are ever converted into collective capability. The conventional "more-is-better" reading of social capital cannot accommodate the school that is rich in relationships and poor in results.

This article introduces that missing element as social capital activation: the process through which a school organization converts social relationships into collective capacity. The guiding question is therefore not whether a school has

social capital, but why some schools manage to activate it for innovation and adaptation while others do not. The study makes three contributions. First, it specifies a process model that inserts an activation mechanism recognition, alignment, mobilisation and institutionalisation between social capital and school improvement. Second, it offers a diagnostic matrix that crosses the stock of social capital with the degree of its activation, locating schools in a space the static literature cannot represent. Third, it gives a critical account of the dark side of relational wealth, showing how bonding capital that runs ahead of bridging can close a school against the very ideas it needs. The remainder of the article reviews the relevant literature, states the research questions, describes the method, presents four empirical themes, and discusses their implications for theory and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social capital in educational organizations

Three foundational accounts continue to anchor the concept of social capital, and each contributes something the others do not. Coleman (1988, 1990) located social capital in the structure of relations among actors, identifying three forms obligations and expectations, information channels, and norms and arguing that network *closure* (dense, interlocking ties) is what allows obligations to be honoured and norms enforced. This emphasis on closure proves double-edged, as the present study will show. Bourdieu (1986) approached social capital as one of several convertible forms of capital, tied to the durable networks of acquaintance and recognition through which actors secure advantage; his account foregrounds power and access. Putnam (1993, 2000) shifted the focus to the collective level, defining social capital as the features of social organization, trust, norms and networks that improve a community's capacity for coordinated action, and famously distinguishing bonding from bridging ties.

Organizational theory refined these foundations in ways that bear directly on the question of activation. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) parsed social capital into a structural dimension (the configuration of ties), a relational dimension (trust, norms, obligations and identification) and a cognitive dimension (shared language, codes and narratives), arguing that it is the combination and exchange these dimensions enable that creates new intellectual capital. Lin (2001) reframed social capital in explicitly network terms as resources embedded in social structure that actors *access* and *mobilise* for purposive action a formulation that already implies a process beyond mere possession. Granovetter's (1973) account of the strength of weak ties and Burt's (2004) of brokerage across structural holes further specify why bridging connections, rather than dense bonding ones, are the usual conduits of novel information and good ideas.

Brought into education, these ideas have been productive. Bryk and Schneider (2002) showed that relational trust functions as a core resource for school improvement, lowering the risk of reform and enabling the candid exchange that change requires. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) folded social capital into a broader notion of professional capital the compound of human, social and decisional capital that, in their argument, must be built systemically rather than

left to chance. Empirically, Leana and Pil (2006) demonstrated that both internal social capital (relations among teachers) and external social capital (relations between the principal and outside stakeholders) predict school performance, and Pil and Leana (2009) confirmed the effect on student achievement growth. Yet, as Dika and Singh's (2002) critical synthesis and Demir's (2021) systematic review both observe, the field has tended to correlate the presence of social capital with outcomes while under-specifying the organizational process that connects the two. Notably, Demir (2021) concludes that it is the organizational structures of schools, rather than the mere existence of ties, that moderate whether teacher social capital yields its benefits a finding that points squarely toward the activation argument developed here.

Following Woolcock (1998) and Putnam (2000), it is conventional to distinguish three forms of social capital by their relational locus. Bonding capital binds the members of a close-knit group; bridging capital connects otherwise separate groups; and linking capital reaches across formal differences of power and status to external stakeholders and authority. The distinction matters because the three forms do very different work: bonding generates solidarity and support, bridging circulates new ideas, and linking secures external legitimacy and resources. Table 1 maps the three onto the two schools studied here.

Table 1. Forms of social capital and their manifestation in the cases

Form	Relational locus	Manifestation in the two madrasahs
Bonding	Strong ties within a group (teacher-teacher; peer cliques)	Informal confiding ("curhat"), the "big family" culture, senior-junior mentoring, student dorm groups
Bridging	Ties across groups (units, generations, factions)	Cross-generation knowledge exchange; links between academic and ma'had staff and across informal cliques
Linking	Ties to external stakeholders and authority	Parent trust and the school committee; relations with the education office and surrounding community

The problem of passive social capital

If the conventional literature has a default assumption, it is that more social capital is better. A growing critical strand questions this. Portes (1998) catalogued the negative consequences that dense social capital can produce — the exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedom, and downward-levelling norms that penalise those who would rise or deviate. Adler and Kwon (2002) insisted that the benefits of social capital are contingent rather than guaranteed, and warned of over-embeddedness and lock-in. Coleman's (1988) own emphasis on closure cuts both ways: the very density that allows a group to trust and enforce can also wall it off from outside information and shield it from challenge.

It is therefore useful to distinguish positive (open) social capital, which yields innovation, collaboration and learning, from closed social capital, which

yields exclusivity, resistance to change and the entrenchment of seniority (Table 2.)

The two are not different substances but different states of the same relational fabric: a network can be turned outward, made to circulate ideas and tolerate dissent, or turned inward, made to police loyalty and conformity. The familiar self-description of a school as “one big family” captures the ambivalence precisely. The same warmth that bonds a staff, lowers transaction costs and sustains everyday cooperation can also make criticism feel like betrayal, so that disagreement migrates from the meeting room to the corridor and the problems that most need airing are the least likely to be aired.

Table 2. Two faces of social capital

Positive (open / bridging) social capital	Closed (excess-bonding) social capital
Produces innovation and learning	Produces exclusivity and gate-keeping
Enables candid disagreement	Suppresses criticism as “disloyalty”
Opens information across groups	Concentrates information in an inner circle
Treats difference as a resource	Enforces conformity and seniority

This distinction is the heart of the article’s novelty. The decisive variable for school improvement is not the quantity of social capital a school holds but whether that capital is opened and put to work. A school may sit on a deep reserve of trust and yet, because the reserve is never activated or is activated only inwardly, as closure derive little organizational benefit from it. Recognising passive and closed social capital as real and consequential states, rather than treating any social capital as automatically productive, is the precondition for theorising activation.

Social capital activation theory

Building on these strands, the article proposes social capital activation as the process through which school leaders intentionally convert relational resources into collective organizational action. The proposal responds directly to the gap identified above: where the literature richly describes the stock of social capital and its correlation with outcomes, it has said comparatively little about the conversion process that links the two. Activation names that process and decomposes it into four mechanisms.

In recognition, leaders read the relational terrain who holds networks, who carries informal influence, where trust is thick and where it is thin. This is the diagnostic precondition of activation and corresponds to Lin’s (2001) “access” to embedded resources. In alignment, leaders connect individual and group interests to shared organizational goals, drawing on the relational and cognitive dimensions of social capital trust, identification and shared meaning (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) and on the relational trust that Bryk and Schneider (2002) identify as the precondition of risk-taking. In mobilisation, leaders channel existing ties into programmes, innovation and problem-solving; this is Lin’s

(2001) “mobilisation”, and it depends especially on bridging ties and brokerage, the conduits of new ideas (Burt, 2004; Granovetter, 1973). In institutionalisation, leaders embed the resulting practices in rules, culture and systems so that the new capacity outlasts any individual the step that turns episodic, person-dependent activation into durable professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The four mechanisms and their behavioural expression are represented in the conceptual model below.

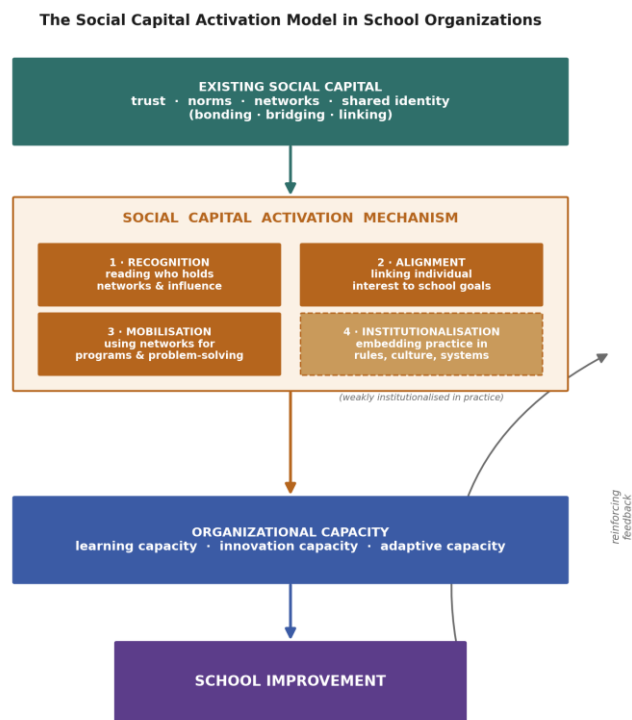


Figure 1. The social capital activation model in school organizations

Read as a process rather than a list, the mechanism is a recurring cycle: leaders sense relational resources, frame a shared problem, mobilise ties into collaborative action, and – ideally – codify what works so that the next cycle begins from firmer ground. The fourth step is drawn provisionally in Figure 2 because, as the findings show, it is the one schools most often leave incomplete; activation that stops at mobilisation produces real but fragile, leader-dependent gains.

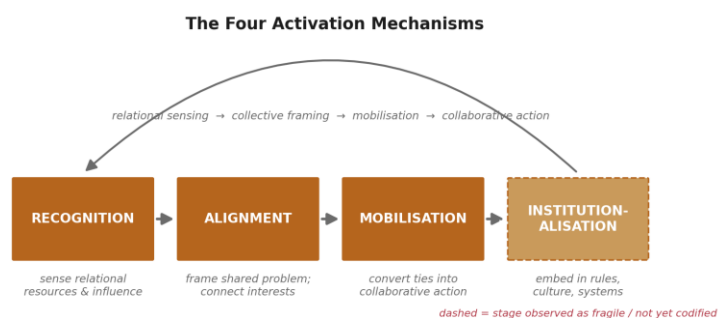


Figure 2. The four activation mechanisms

Research Questions

The study is guided by three questions, which move from the existence of social capital, through the leader's role, to the underlying mechanism of conversion:

RQ1: How does social capital develop within school organizations?

RQ2: How do school leaders activate social capital for organizational improvement?

RQ3: What mechanisms transform social relationships into organizational capacity?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive, multiple-case design. The choice follows from the research questions, which ask not how much social capital the schools hold but how relational resources are developed, read and converted into capacity, process questions for which an interpretive case study, attentive to meaning and sequence in a natural setting, is better suited than a variable-centred survey. A multiple-case design was preferred over a single case because it permits both literal replication of the activation process across organizations and theoretically informative contrast between them.

Two state Islamic senior secondary madrasahs in Lamongan Regency, East Java, were selected purposively using a maximum-variation logic, so that schools with different relational cultures could be compared while holding the basic institutional form constant. Site 1 is an urban madrasah located in the centre of Lamongan town; it has a more administrative, technocratic structure, a high proportion of postgraduate-qualified teachers and strong external expectations of academic achievement. Site 2 is a sub-urban madrasah set among agricultural surroundings; its culture is more homogeneous, communal and kinship-oriented, and its strength lies in close personal relationships rather than formal qualification. Both operate an accommodative, non-compulsory boarding (ma'had) unit alongside the formal school, which makes them comparable hybrid forms. Critically, the two are similar in scale (Table 3), so that differences in relational dynamics can plausibly be attributed to culture and leadership rather than to organizational size.

Within each school, informants were sampled purposively to span the organization both vertically and horizontally, on the premise that a relational process can only be understood from multiple vantage points. They comprised principals, vice-principals, senior and junior teachers, administrative staff, students and parents. Three sources of data were combined. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews explored how relationships formed, how policies were received, and how problems were solved; non-participant observation covered formal meetings and the informal texture of daily interaction, including the Friday communal activities and the dormitory; and documentary sources, standard operating procedures, meeting minutes and references to digital (WhatsApp) communication were used to corroborate and contextualise the accounts. Fieldwork was conducted across 2026, with quotations dated to preserve the sequence of the inquiry.

Analysis was thematic and iterative. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded openly; codes were then clustered through constant comparison into the four themes reported below and tested against the full corpus and across the two sites. The four activation mechanisms functioned as sensitising concepts that oriented the analysis without foreclosing it; this openness mattered, because the fourth theme the dark side of bonding capital emerged from disconfirming evidence rather than from the initial framework, and the incompleteness of institutionalisation likewise surfaced against, not in line with, the model's expectations. Trustworthiness was pursued along the usual qualitative criteria: credibility through source and method triangulation and prolonged engagement; transferability through thick description of the two settings; and dependability and confirmability through verbatim quotation and an explicit account of how themes were derived. Participation was voluntary and identities were protected through the coding scheme, with sensitive material on internal tension handled accordingly. As in all interpretive work, the analysis is shaped by the researchers' own reading of the setting, and the findings are offered as an analytically generalisable account of a process rather than as a statistically representative sample of schools.

RESEARCH RESULT

The four themes trace social capital from latent resource, through the leader's activating work, to organizational capability, and finally to the risks that attend relationships grown too dense to question. Table 4 summarises them before each is developed in turn.

Table 4. Summary of findings

Theme	Analytical claim	Illustrative empirical anchor
1	Social capital exists but remains dormant	Rich informal ties confiding, "big family" culture, cliques unmobilised for organizational ends
2	Leadership activates hidden relational resources	Leaders do not create social capital; they detect and switch it on via recognition, alignment and mobilisation
3	From informal relations to organizational capability	Teacher ties → learning forums; student ties → peer mentoring/mediation; parent ties → stabilising trust; escalating innovation portfolio
4	Risks of excessive bonding social capital	"Love the school" norm and loyalty labels suppress criticism; inner-circle information access; conformity and seniority

Theme 1: Social capital exists but remains dormant

Both schools were rich in relational resources, but much of that wealth lay dormant in informal ties that had not been turned to organizational purpose. Beneath the formal structure ran a dense undergrowth of confiding relationships, kinship-like warmth and self-organising cliques, which members themselves recognised and named. Informal groupings formed around shared dispositions

a devoutly religious set, a sociable “coffee” set known for candid talk outside formal forums, and a rule-oriented set focused on procedure each a small reservoir of bonding capital with its own solidarity and its own voice. Alongside these ran the everyday practice of confiding, through which staff metabolised friction long before it reached any official channel:

“If there is a misunderstanding with a colleague, I usually talk to a close friend first. Not to complain, but to ask for another point of view. Usually after that I am calmer and can speak directly to the person concerned.” (Junior Teacher-1)

A second informant made the same point from the staff side, noting that many work problems could be settled through relaxed conversation outside office hours, and that routing everything immediately to the leadership only stiffened the atmosphere. These bonding networks functioned as an emotional safety valve; they absorbed tension and sustained cooperation. But as a stock of capital they were largely untapped for organizational ends they cushioned the school without yet building it. The same was true of the vertical ties among students, where trusted seniors absorbed and defused peer conflict before it reached teachers, and of the external goodwill of parents, who extended the school latitude to handle problems internally. In each case the relationship was real and valuable, yet inert with respect to learning or innovation.

Leaders were aware that this latent capital resided in the very groups an impatient manager might try to dissolve. Rather than flattening the informal landscape, one principal deliberately preserved it as a reserve to be drawn upon:

“Before the school year starts I map things first. I do not want to break up the existing groups the senior teachers who gather on their own, or the younger teachers with their own digital community because that is actually where their social capital lies. What I do is map the flashpoints.” (Principals-1)

The recognition that relational resources were present but inert is the necessary premise of everything that follows. Social capital here was potential energy: real, considerable, distributed across bonding, bridging and linking ties and waiting to be converted. The schools did not lack relationships; they lacked, as yet, the means of turning relationships into results.

Theme 2: Leadership activates hidden relational resources

The pivotal finding is that effective leaders did not manufacture social capital; they found it and switched it on. The work of activation began with recognition a fine-grained reading of the organization’s emotional and relational currents that one principal described as a kind of social radar:

“Conflict usually isn’t visible straight away, but you can feel it in the change of atmosphere – a meeting goes quieter than usual, or a group starts holding its own discussions. I deliberately sit with the teachers outside the formal forum, just for coffee, to catch the mood.” (vice-Principals-1)

Recognition was not idle observation but deliberate mapping. Both principals began the year by charting the groups and their relationships, though they did so with different emphases. One treated the school as a mosaic of factions to be kept distinct yet connected; the other stressed the connective tissue between groups, reasoning that conflict arises less from the existence of cliques than from the absence of clear links between them. As the second put it, the task

was to map each group's role and then keep open the channels among them — a recognition of where bridging capital was thin and needed strengthening.

Recognition shaded into alignment, the work of making members feel that organizational goals were also theirs. Both principals treated trust as something to be constructed deliberately, first by explaining the reasoning behind demanding policies rather than merely announcing them, and then by behaving with scrupulous consistency:

"Being transparent isn't enough. I have to be consistent. If I say every voice will be heard, then it really must be heard — no picking and choosing. I deliberately ask the newest teacher, 'What do you think?', and I ask the administrative staff too. If even one person feels ignored because their position seems unimportant, trust drops immediately." (Principals-2)

The pay-off of this patient alignment was visible in how the two schools received challenging policy, and the contrast is instructive for the argument. Where alignment had succeeded and trust ran high, members granted the leadership the benefit of the doubt:

"If the leadership makes a new, challenging programme, we rarely ask what's behind it. We already trust completely that the leadership must have a strong, well-considered reason. So even if it is hard, we don't get suspicious. We just carry it out, because we know the direction is for the quality of the school." (Staff-2)

Where trust was thinner, the same kind of policy first met suspicion, and acceptance had to be earned anew each time:

"There was a change in the division of duties, and honestly we wondered for a while whether there was some personal reason behind it. We weren't convinced straight away. Only after a long explanation in the meeting did we try to understand, though inside there was still some dissatisfaction." (Junior Teacher-1)

Alignment, in short, set the exchange rate of activation: high trust converted the energy of a demanding policy into motivation, whereas thin trust let it slip toward resistance. With alignment in place, leaders turned to mobilisation the channelling of existing ties into organizational action. Rather than broadcasting policy from the top, they routed it through trusted, influential figures so that it reached colleagues in a peer's voice:

"Take the new curriculum. If I keep doing the talking, it can be seen as just a superior's policy. But when Pak Nur tells his colleagues that, after long discussion, he sees the benefit, acceptance comes faster. Influence doesn't always have to come from position." (Principals-1)

Mobilisation also worked through deliberately cultivated rituals of association Friday communal-service and religious gatherings at one site, and fortnightly circles combining communal prayer (istighosah), a rotating savings club and a shared meal at the other which thickened relational ties precisely so that they could later be drawn upon:

"Every two weeks we hold a gathering at someone's home, taking turns — istighosah, then the savings club, then we eat together. Some bring their whole family, some come alone. It lets us know our colleagues not just as workmates but as a family, and the bonds among us grow stronger." (Senior Teacher-2)

Strikingly, leaders also mobilised social capital by deliberately staging productive friction. One principal opened monthly meetings with an "open

policy debate”, throwing a deliberately sensitive issue onto the table and inviting two groups of teachers to argue it out. The aim was not to find a winner but to switch on the relational and intellectual energy of the staff to make professional reputation the engine of preparation and reading. Activation, on this evidence, is not always gentle; it can mean engineering the conditions in which a dense but quiet network begins to talk, contest and produce. Across all these episodes the leaders behaved less like commanders issuing instructions than like activators of a relational system that already existed, the moves from recognition through alignment to mobilisation marking successive switches being thrown.

Theme 3: From informal relations to organizational capability

Activation paid off when informal relations hardened into organizational capability the learning, innovation and adaptive capacities of the model. Teacher ties were converted into collective learning capacity through reflective forums in which the staff examined not only targets but the experience of working together. One principal was explicit that these forums were about tending relationships as much as reviewing results:

“What matters most is not the target but keeping our hearts together. Every month we have a teachers’ forum. I usually open by reading the Qur’an, then we ask each other: while chasing these targets, are we still united? Is anyone feeling left behind? If someone feels alone or under pressure, that is where they can speak.” (Principals-1)

Learning capacity also grew through a quieter mechanism of peer correction, in which colleagues, rather than the formal evaluation system, prompted improvement a clear instance of bridging knowledge across the staff:

“Sometimes the correction comes from a friend. After teaching or after a meeting, someone will say, ‘Maybe that approach could be improved.’ It isn’t always formal. But from that we rethink things. If we only waited for the official evaluation, improvement would be slower.” (Student-2)

Student relations were converted into structures of responsibility in the dormitory, where the pressure of higher behavioural targets prompted supervisors to invent new arrangements rather than simply tighten control:

“From that demand, new initiatives appeared. In one unit they began developing a peer-mentoring system – senior students given more responsibility to guide the younger ones. In another, staff involved students in drafting the dormitory rules, and it turned out more orderly because students felt included. There is now even a peer-mediation system: if there is friction, they settle it through deliberation first, before staff step in.” (vice-Principal-2)

External, linking capital did parallel work. Parents’ trust in the school’s deliberative, family-style approach gave the organization room to solve problems internally rather than under external pressure, stabilising it enough to take risks. As one parent explained, the confidence that issues would be talked through in consultation rather than decided unilaterally was exactly what made them comfortable leaving matters in the school’s hands. The clearest expression of innovation capacity was an escalating portfolio of programmes that matured year on year: from routine religious activities, to documentary films and podcasts on student life and substance-abuse prevention, and then to social-

entrepreneurship projects, environmental initiatives and peer mental-health support groups. Each cohort of programmes was bolder than the last because the relational ground had been made safe for experiment. Adaptive capacity appeared most vividly where the academic and boarding sides had to be reconciled, as in the locally co-designed reflection points built into the new national curriculum:

"I invited representatives of the factions to sit together and said: this curriculum gives us freedom; now argue out how to apply it here without losing our identity. The outcome was a consensus that every learning unit must have a point of reflection on Islamic values, designed together. Because it was the result of their own contest of ideas, they felt strong ownership of it." (Principals-2)

In each of these cases a relationship that had been merely social became a durable organizational capability a learning routine, an innovation, an adaptive arrangement. This is the conversion the activation model is meant to explain, and it is what distinguishes a school that merely has social capital from one that uses it.

Themen 4: The risks of excessive bonding social capital

The fourth theme is the critical counterpoint, and it emerged most strongly at the urban site. The same dense bonds that enabled activation could, when bonding ran ahead of bridging and openness, curdle into a closed social capital that suppressed the very candour innovation requires. Trust itself was experienced as conditional on the appearance of loyalty:

"If there is no trust, people just stay silent in meetings. Here we can actually disagree, but there is still a wariness. Sometimes it isn't fear of being scolded, but fear of being labelled disloyal." (Senior Teacher-2)

That wariness was reinforced by a norm of devotion to the institution that was invoked, in effect, to discourage dissent. The norm operated at every level of the school. Among teachers it framed compliance as love of the institution:

"The message here is always the same: 'do everything for the good name of the school'. So when a task feels heavy or a policy is sudden, we are reminded about devotion. In the end we have to comply, because if you object even a little it looks as though you don't love the school. So we just smile and carry on, even while wondering inside." (Senior Teacher-1)

Administrative staff reported the same pressure to keep grievances out of sight in the name of loyalty, and even student activities carried the lesson early, as guardians steered young people toward agreeing on a single decision for the sake of the school's good name. Closure also showed up as the privatisation of information within an inner circle, which left others feeling shut out of the decisions that affected them:

"Sometimes we only find out after everything has been decided. It isn't about agreeing or not; it's about why we weren't consulted from the start. Usually it's the same few people who know first." (Student-1)

And it showed up as a seniority that treated junior staff as subordinates rather than colleagues, dampening exactly the fresh ideas that bridging capital is supposed to circulate; a junior teacher described feeling like "help" rather than a partner in discussion, their suggestions met with the reminder that they were still new. The contrast with the sub-urban site, where the norm around dissent was

looser and more egalitarian and students took open debate to be a normal part of reaching agreement, underscores the point: the difference between the two schools lay less in how much social capital they held than in whether that capital was opened or closed. Read against the activation model, these are the symptoms of an organization whose stock of bonding capital is high but whose activation especially its bridging and its tolerance of challenge is constrained. Strong relationships, the theme makes clear, are not by themselves a good; they require opening as much as building, and they can actively impede improvement when loyalty crowds out candour.

DISCUSSION

Inserting an activation mechanism

The study's central contribution is to insert a missing step into the conventional account of social capital and schools. Where the standard claim runs directly from social capital to improvement (Leana & Pil, 2006; Pil & Leana, 2009), the evidence here supports a longer causal chain: social capital → activation mechanism → organizational capacity → improvement. The first theme establishes that the stock exists but is frequently dormant; the second and third show that it becomes capacity only when leaders recognise, align, mobilise and (sometimes) institutionalise it. This account gives empirical content to Demir's (2021) conclusion that organizational structures, not the mere presence of ties, moderate whether teacher social capital yields outcomes — the activation mechanisms are, in effect, the structuring work that moderation refers to. It also connects naturally to Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) dimensions: recognition operates on the structural configuration of ties, alignment on the relational and cognitive dimensions of trust and shared meaning, and mobilisation on the combination and exchange through which new value is created. Table 5 sets each mechanism against its evidence in the two schools.

Table 5. Activation mechanisms and their evidence

Mechanism	Leader action	Evidence in the data
Recognition	Sensing who holds networks and influence	"Social radar"; deliberate mapping of existing groups/factions at the start of the year (KS-1, KS-2)
Alignment	Linking individual interest to school goals	Explaining the "why" of policy; consistent, equal treatment to build trust (KS-2)
Mobilisation	Using networks for programmes and problem-solving	Working through influential peers; Friday communal rituals; istighosah-and-gathering circles; open policy debates (KS-1)
Institutionalisation	Embedding practice in rules, culture, systems	Largely incomplete — no written SOP; activation remains leader-centric and therefore fragile (KS-2, WKS-1)

Activation is trust-conditioned

Activation is not a universal technique that works the same way everywhere; it is conditioned by the relational ground on which it operates. The two sites occupy different positions on a diagnostic matrix that crosses the stock of social capital with the degree of its activation. Both schools sit high on stock; they diverge on activation. The sub-urban site, with its participatory, trust-based leadership, moved its relational wealth toward organizational capacity the upper-right quadrant of the matrix. The urban site, with more centralised and normatively closed activation, tended to leave its considerable stock dormant and exposed to the closure documented in Theme 4 the upper-left quadrant. The matrix also names two cautionary positions absent from the present cases but visible in principle: a low-stock, high-activation “forced push”, in which mobilisation without trust breeds resistance, and a low-stock, low-activation inertia.

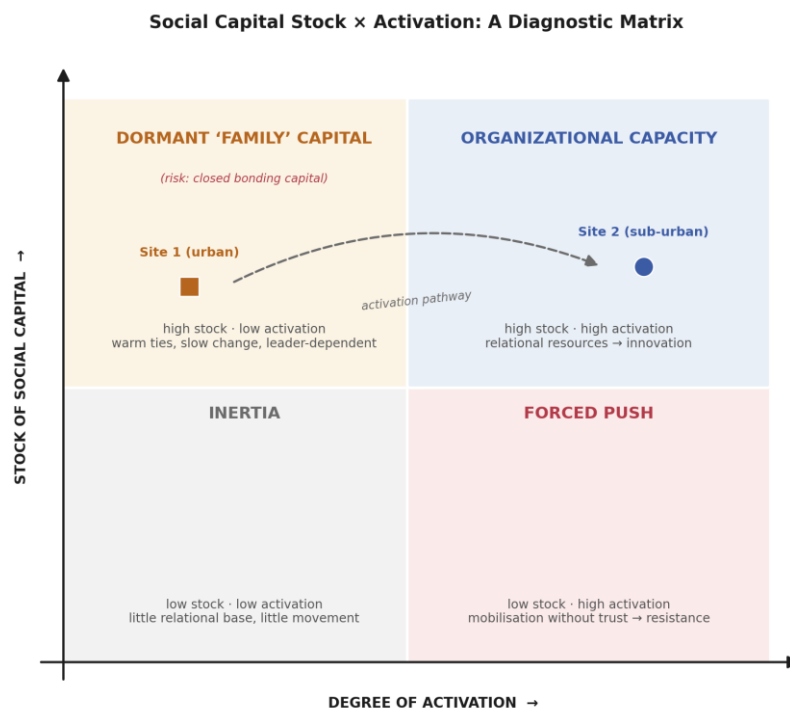


Figure 3. Social capital stock × activation: a diagnostic matrix

The mechanism that explains the divergence is trust. The contrast between the staff member who simply trusted that a hard policy had a sound reason and the teacher who suspected a personal motive behind a reassignment shows trust functioning as the exchange rate of activation: where relational trust is high, the energy released by a demanding policy is converted into motivation; where it is low, the same energy dissipates into suspicion. This is consistent with Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) argument that relational trust is the core resource that makes the risk of reform bearable. Activation presupposes trust; where trust is absent, attempting to mobilise relational resources may do more harm than good, which is precisely why the “forced push” quadrant is a trap rather than a strategy.

The dark side and the bridging remedy

Theme 4 connects the analysis to the critical tradition in social-capital theory and supplies the study's most pointed practical warning. Coleman's (1988) emphasis on closure, Portes' (1998) catalogue of social capital's negative consequences exclusion, excess claims, restricted freedom and downward-leveilling norms and Adler and Kwon's (2002) insistence on its contingencies all anticipate the finding that excess bonding can suppress innovation. A school that is "one big family" may discover that family loyalty has become a tax on candour. The remedy implied by the data is bridging. Weak ties and brokerage across groups are the usual conduits of novel information and good ideas (Burt, 2004; Granovetter, 1973), and it is exactly these that closed, seniority-bound networks choke off. Activation, on this reading, is not merely the switching-on of existing bonds but the deliberate cultivation of bridging Lin's (2001) accessing and mobilising of resources that lie beyond one's immediate circle to offset the insularity that dense bonding otherwise breeds. The leader's task is therefore double: to warm the bonds enough that people will act together, and to open them enough that they will hear what they would rather not.

Institutionalisation as the unfinished mechanism

Finally, the data expose institutionalisation as the weak link in the chain. In both schools, activation was practised as a personal craft rather than codified as procedure; there was no written standard for managing relational dynamics, and the capability lived in the persons of particular leaders. This leaves the achievement fragile and leader-centric: the warm forums, the brokered acceptance of policy, the participatory dormitory all could leave with the principal who built them. Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) argument that professional capital must be built systemically rather than left to individual virtuosity speaks directly to this gap. Completing the fourth mechanism giving relational practice the administrative scaffolding that would let it outlast individuals, without bureaucratising away the very warmth that makes activation possible is the principal unfinished task these schools face. It is also a reminder, consistent with research on the multiple pathways through which schools improve (Arora-Jonsson, Demir, Norgren & Wennberg, 2024), that there is no single lever: durable improvement requires both the activation of relational resources and their institutional embedding.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is not enough for a school to build good relationships. Trust, networks and a strong communal culture are potential, not performance; left to themselves they may simply persist as pleasant but inert sociability, or even harden into a closure that resists change. What converts relational resources into organizational capacity is activation the deliberate work of recognising where social capital lies, aligning it with collective goals, mobilising it into action, and institutionalising the practices that result. Across two contrasting madrasahs, the schools that prospered were not those with the most relationships but those that turned the relationships they had outward and to work. Schools, in short, need not only to accumulate social capital but to manage, activate and direct it;

activation, not accumulation, is what turns relationships into organizational power.

For practice, several implications follow. Leaders should see themselves as activators of an existing relational system rather than as sole authors of school improvement, beginning each cycle by reading where networks and influence actually lie. They should invest in bridging ties and openness, not only in comfortable bonding, since it is bridging that circulates the ideas on which innovation depends and bonding-in-excess that quietly suppresses them. They should treat trust as the precondition of activation, building it through transparency and consistency before attempting to mobilise relational resources for demanding ends. And they should begin to codify their relational practices the forums, the brokerage, the participatory routines so that the capacity these create can survive a change of leadership.

The study's scope bounds its claims. It rests on two madrasahs in a single regency of East Java, studied qualitatively and in part through retrospective accounts; its findings are offered as an analytically generalisable account of a process rather than as a statistically representative sample, and the activation model awaits testing in other settings and against quantitative measures of the stock $\times$ activation relationship. Future research might trace activation longitudinally, examine how and whether institutionalisation can be achieved without draining the warmth that makes activation possible, and explore the model in other hybrid and community-embedded organizations. Whatever the setting, the underlying argument is likely to hold: relationships become organizational power not by being possessed, but by being activated.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future studies should examine the social capital activation model in different educational settings and organizational contexts using longitudinal and mixed-method approaches. Particular attention should be given to the institutionalization mechanism, which emerged as the weakest yet most critical stage for sustaining organizational capacity. Further research may also quantitatively test the relationship between social capital stock, activation processes, and school performance, as well as explore how activation dynamics operate in other community-based and hybrid organizations.

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