

Organizational Contexts That Influence Social Capital Formation Among PTA Volunteers in a Philippine Public School

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Abstract

Lower-income communities often lack the financial and human capital needed for strong social capital, hindering civic participation like Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). However, a Philippine public school PTA defied this trend. A 2017/2023 qualitative study, involving focus groups and interviews, revealed that despite limited resources, local reciprocity norms fostered strong ties among PTA volunteers. This generated social capital, providing crucial resources for the school. Using Coleman's social capital dimensions, the study details the interaction quality that built these ties and networks. It demonstrates how civic organizations in resource-scarce settings can leverage social capital to overcome contextual disadvantages

Keywords: social capital, parent-teacher associations, Philippines, public schools, organizational contexts

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Introduction

Social capital is often seen as lacking in less affluent communities due to limited financial and human resources (Wilson, 2013). In contrast, wealthier communities benefit from more effective social capital because of their existing resource base (Warren et al., 2001). Wilson's (2013) "neighborhood effect" explains these arguments by emphasizing how community context—economic, educational, and social—shapes the formation of social capital.

This context influences the functioning of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs). While PTAs in affluent schools often engage in strategic initiatives, those in poorer communities may focus on addressing basic needs. Yet, a public school PTA in Quezon City challenges these assumptions. Despite limited resources, its members actively supported school operations, built strong ties, and mobilized social capital to benefit the wider community. In this case, the volunteers became social capital themselves.

Coleman (1990) and Putnam (2000) describe PTAs as forms of social capital that produce public goods and reflect civic trust. However, as studies show (Noguera, 2001; Wacquant, 1998; Wilson, 2013), community context—especially in areas of concentrated poverty—shapes the availability and effectiveness of social capital. When public and private institutions fail, formal social capital breaks down, limiting opportunities for civic engagement (Kuhn, 2005).

Despite these barriers, residents in poor communities can build connections through civic organizations, expanding their access to resources (Warren, 2005). In such cases, social capital can compensate for material deficits (Edin & Lein, 1997; Stack, 1974). Government support for civic engagement, especially in education, can strengthen these efforts. As Noguera (2001) notes, empowered parents can help mobilize limited school resources for collective benefit.

Ultimately, PTAs in under-resourced communities demonstrate that strong relationships and civic participation can generate valuable social capital—even in the absence of wealth.

The main objective of this study is to describe and explain how dimensions of social capital (levels of trust and obligations, information channels, norms and sanctions) available within the organization are formed among PTA volunteers. Since this study's level of analysis is at the meso level, the PTA as the unit of analysis will be explored in terms of its social capital dimensions and processes. This study attempts to do this by answering this research question - How did the PTA volunteers form social capital in the organization?

Literature Review

Adopting a meso-level approach, this examines the PTA as a unit of analysis to understand the organizational processes that generate social capital. The study is grounded in Coleman's (1988) and Putnam's (2000) theories on social capital and civic associations, while also considering how the PTA's embeddedness in a less affluent school community (Small, 2009) shapes these processes.

Trust

Coleman (1990) emphasizes that a trustworthy social environment enables obligations and expectations, serving as a reservoir of social capital. Social trust, often driven by reciprocity and civic networks, includes both personal and generalized trust (Robinson & Jackson, 2001). Small's (2009) study of daycare centers illustrates how organizational membership fosters trust—even among relative strangers—through shared norms, institutional practices, and proxy-based trust. For instance, mothers relied on each other for child pick-up duties, with trust facilitated by the center's structured interactions.

Putnam (2000) expands on Coleman's (1990) work by distinguishing thick trust (strong, personal ties) and thin trust (generalized trust in broader networks), both of which emerge through frequent interaction and shared experiences. Organizational structures that nurture these interactions strengthen communal trust and encourage participation (Murray et al., 2020). Jones and George (1998) further relate these ideas to conditional and unconditional trust—where the former supports cooperation with minimal risk, and the latter involves deeper commitment rooted in shared values. Weak ties, though less intimate, are essential for broadening access to information and opportunities (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000), contributing to organizational efficiency and cohesion.

Information Channels

Information channels, according to Coleman (1988), are vital for mobilizing social capital. They facilitate access to timely, relevant information through frequent interpersonal interactions (Li & Ye, 2014). Trust within the organization promotes open communication and enhances the effectiveness of information exchange (Kwon et al., 2013). These channels also transmit reputations and past collaborations, reinforcing norms of trustworthiness (Field, 2008). At both individual and organizational levels, nurtured relationships and trust-rich environments are conduits for valuable information—making social ties critical assets for members (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009; Bian et al., 2020).

Norms and Sanctions

Norms and sanctions help regulate behavior in organizations by promoting collective interests and minimizing negative externalities (Coleman, 1988, 1990). Coleman's concept of intergenerational closure, particularly in educational settings, illustrates how dense social networks enable shared oversight of behavior. Putnam (2000) reinforces this by noting that closed networks strengthen trust through reciprocity and accountability. When networks are open or fragmented, reputational transmission and the enforcement of sanctions weaken, undermining communal trust and cohesion.

Appropriable Organizations and Public Good

Coleman (1988) introduces the concept of “appropriable organizations”—structures formed for one purpose but usable for others. For instance, PTAs initially formed for governance may be repurposed for roles like school discipline enforcement or community organizing. These organizations generate social capital by providing members access to shared resources, often beyond their original scope (Edwards et al., 2019). Because the benefits extend to the wider community, the social capital they produce functions as a public good (Coleman, 1988, 1990).

Civic Associations

Putnam (1994, 2000) argues that active participation in civic associations builds trust and social capital. He emphasizes that meaningful engagement—not just nominal membership—is key. Volunteering, in particular, strengthens social networks and enhances individuals' access to social resources (van Ingen & Kalmijn, 2010). Organizations that facilitate shared experiences foster strong interpersonal connections and trust. As Kwon et al. (2013) note, understanding individual ties requires examining the organizational contexts in which they are embedded. The depth and type of participation within these associations are critical determinants of the resources members can access.

Methodology

This qualitative case study focuses on Holy Spirit Elementary School (HSES), a large public school in Barangay Holy Spirit, Quezon City, with over 8,000 students (Holy Spirit Elementary School, 2023). The barangay, home to 111,901 residents, is one of the most populous in the city, with 70% classified as urban poor (Barangay Holy Spirit, 2023).

Data collection included face-to-face interviews with the principal, guidance counselor, and PTA officers in 2017 (pre-pandemic) and 2023 (post-pandemic), involving different individuals each time. FGDs with PTA volunteers were only conducted in 2023, divided into two groups: 7 pre-pandemic and 8 post-pandemic volunteers. All 14 participants were unemployed mothers from low-income, two-parent households, averaging 39 years of age with two children.

The study has several limitations. First, the lack of 2017 FGDs prevents comparison of pre- and post-pandemic social capital. Second, participant selection was based on PTA officers' familiarity, possibly excluding diverse perspectives. Third, the all-female, intact-family profile of volunteers may have shaped the data in ways that overlook other family structures and gender roles. Fourth, their demographic homogeneity may limit insights into bridging social capital. Lastly, as a single case study, findings cannot be generalized or compared with other contexts.

Results

Conditions in the School That Influence the Nature of PTA Engagements

Holy Spirit Elementary School (HSES), located in Barangay Holy Spirit, Quezon City, serves 8,121 students in two shifts due to classroom shortages. With a classroom-learner ratio of 1:61 and toilet-learner ratio of 1:77 (Holy Spirit Elementary School, 2023), far above the recommended 1:50, the strain on resources is evident. In School Year 2022–2023 alone, the school lacked 73 classrooms. Some teachers manage as many as 85 students per class.

This strain directly affects teachers' capacity. As the principal shared, “the teachers are already burdened with their heavy workload.” The Teacher Board Member echoed this, “Especially when it comes to paperwork, we don’t know what to prioritize anymore... When K to 12 was implemented, our workload doubled with heavier responsibilities but our salaries remain the same.”

In this context, PTA involvement becomes vital. The same teacher emphasized, “Yes, their work means a lot, especially when the school needs them most. The volunteers make sure that they are here and ready to help. They have a significant contribution toward the improvement of the school. The teachers cannot do everything—we need their help.”

HSES’s SBM Level III accreditation (Holy Spirit Elementary School, 2023) affirms the school’s commitment to shared governance and active community participation. The principal noted, “plans to improve the school should also come from the members of the community so that they will have ownership... they will be committed, and they will perform.” This shared responsibility is reflected in how the PTA acts on community needs without waiting for directives.

This proactive culture, supported by the principal’s recognition of strong barangay and PTA ties—“they protect the school... that’s a good thing that I capitalize on”—enables trust-based collaboration. The PTA’s embeddedness in a civically engaged school and barangay facilitates the formation of organizational social capital. Decisions to involve the PTA in non-teaching functions are rooted in the belief that they will deliver.

The School Consolidates and Stocks Resources for the School Community by Fostering External Ties

HSES actively brokers partnerships to expand its resources, as mandated by Republic Act No. 9155. Through participation in *Guro, Barangay Lingkod Mamamayan* (GBLM), the school links with civic actors, NGOs, and institutions. GBLM fosters social capital as an appropriate organization focused on public good.

Teachers affiliated with GBLM led the school’s award-winning *Gulayan sa Paaralan*, later adopted by the PTA. Barangay reps offered urban gardening training for teachers and parents, while GBLM also conducts mass feeding for malnourished students and responds to barangay emergencies.

Through GBLM, HSES partnered with AFNI Philippines for donations, feeding programs, and support for *Brigada Eskwela*. It also maintains long-standing ties with Ateneo de Manila University through the Ateneo Center for Educational Development (ACED) and Ateneo Gabay. ACED’s *In-Visible* program shifted from in-school meals to weekly rations during the pandemic—still ongoing. Ateneo Gabay continues to provide academic support, including online tutorials during remote learning. The LGU also contributes school supplies, tablets, and hygiene kits.

The School Forms Internal Ties Through Structures That Make Use of Accessible Online Platforms

Given its large population, HSES developed a structured system of Facebook Messenger group chats that mirrors the hierarchical organization of the PTA. These online structures enable fast and efficient communication across levels and reinforce organizational routines.

The first layer of this structure is a group chat that includes the school principal, PTA officers, and core PTA volunteers. PTA officers consist of the President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Auditor, PRO, and the Parent and Teacher Board Members. The label “PTA volunteers” refers to a group of 15 core members who regularly assist in school activities.

This main group chat serves as the direct communication line from the principal, who shares announcements and urgent information. PTA officers then cascade these messages to grade-level officers.

In the second layer, the PTA President communicates with the seven Grade-Level PTA Officers—one for each grade from Kindergarten to Grade 6. These officers form the next link in the communication chain, ensuring consistency in the dissemination of school information.

The third layer connects Grade-Level Officers to Homeroom PTA Presidents. In this group, homeroom-level concerns and updates are discussed and passed on to class-level parents.

The fourth layer consists of individual group chats per homeroom class, managed by the Homeroom PTA Officers. These chats allow parents from each section to stay informed about daily school matters and receive updates from their teachers.

Finally, there is a fifth group chat that includes all PTA officers, volunteers, and general PTA members. This group serves as a common platform for all parents to raise concerns, share information, and build a sense of community. The PTA President described it as their “virtual bonding space,” where “the parents share their grievances and air out their concerns.” She added that if an issue is too sensitive, she encourages parents to message her privately to avoid gossip.

These nested communication channels facilitate rapid, structured coordination while also allowing organic parent-to-parent interaction. In this way, HSES builds internal social capital not only through physical presence but also through intentional digital engagement that fosters wider networks and deeper trust.

The School Forms Internal Ties Through Programs That Are Consistent With the Mandated Roles of PTAs

The roles of PTA officers and volunteers are closely aligned with DepEd’s guidelines and are tailored to address HSES’s internal challenges. PTA members assist during morning and afternoon shifts as marshals, ensuring order as students arrive and leave. Volunteers help children enter the school, particularly during poor weather, and monitor dismissal to ensure that students are picked up by the correct guardians. One volunteer described how they remind parents to properly prepare their children: “We remind the parents to check if all their children’s things are complete... sometimes they ask us ‘please get my cell phone in my child’s bag,’ so we remind them to put everything in ahead of time.”

When teachers are absent or delayed, PTA volunteers step in as temporary proctors. They supervise students in classrooms, encourage them to complete their assignments, and monitor behavior. One volunteer reported telling students, “If you still have assignments and projects to do, do them now while your teacher has not yet arrived,” while also assuring them, “I’m just here, okay? Teacher asked us to check on you.”

PTA members also respond to emergencies. They accompany sick or injured students to the clinic or, if necessary, to the hospital. They assist children who haven’t been picked up, offering snacks and, in some cases, walking them home. According to the guidance teacher, “Especially when it’s raining, they’re the ones who take charge of the students who are not yet fetched by their parents.”

Beyond daily support, PTA members contribute significantly to school-wide programs. They play an active role in the implementation of *Gulayan sa Paaralan* by collecting recyclable materials, preparing and tilling soil, planting vegetables, and maintaining the garden. These labor-intensive tasks provide opportunities for consistent engagement, shared labor, and frequent interaction—conditions that promote strong internal ties and the cultivation of social capital.

How the PTA's Active Participation in School Serves as a Resource of the School

The PTA functions as an indispensable resource for HSES. By extending the school's human capital, PTA members allow teachers to focus on their core responsibilities. The principal stressed the importance of this arrangement, emphasizing that the support provided by the PTA lightens the teachers' workload. The Teacher Board Member added, "If not for them, only the teachers will do the work and we cannot do it on our own. That's why the role of the PTA is very important."

This dynamic reflects how PTAs mobilize organizational social capital through routine and trusted participation. The level of PTA involvement at HSES demonstrates how generalized trust can be translated into institutional support, echoing Murray et al.'s (2019) finding that PTAs in civically engaged schools function within a "virtuous cycle" of trust, participation, and social resource generation. In a resource-constrained context like HSES, such support is especially critical, consistent with Warren et al.'s (2001) findings on the role of PTAs in less affluent communities.

The PTA's Legacy Framing of Its Participation in School Programs

PTA officers and volunteers at HSES describe their involvement as leaving a "legacy" for the school. This framing reflects a desire to contribute something lasting and meaningful. A sound system donated by the 2017 officers is still used during major events, serving as a tangible reminder of their contribution.

The current PTA has embraced *Gulayan sa Paaralan* as their legacy project, even though it originated under GBLM. Their deep involvement in preparing for competitions and maintaining the garden reflects a strong sense of ownership. One volunteer mentioned how busy they were during the critical days of competition, proud of their hard work and investment.

The Teacher Board Member offered a broader perspective, saying, "They are able to provide guidance to the school. That's why their presence matters—because they are able to give their time and efforts to the students. They are able to provide help to the students who need help the most."

In this sense, the PTA's legacy is not only material but relational and emotional. It demonstrates the PTA's role in sustaining collective efficacy, trust, and solidarity—echoing Putnam's (1994) framework for social capital rooted in civic life.

Discussion

Local Norms of Reciprocity Prompted Social Capital Formation

The formation of social ties among HSES PTA volunteers is shaped by local norms rooted in *pakikipagkapwa* or reciprocity. These norms—*pananagutan* (responsibility), *pakikisama* (cooperation), and *pakikiramay* (empathy)—reflect collective values that guide behavior and underpin social capital formation.

The First Local Norm of Reciprocity: Pananagutan or Social Responsibility

At the core of the local norms of reciprocity, *pananagutan* expresses a deep sense of responsibility toward others, often described in the language of being a *kapitbahay* or neighbor. This norm thrives in contexts of generalized trust, such as HSES, which has earned SBM Level III accreditation and hosts civic organizations like GBLM that model community engagement.

This sense of duty is evident in how volunteers care for students left behind at school. One said, “We really pity the students because they are already hungry after school, that’s why we bring them to their homes.” Another shared, “If no one fetches the student and they live nearby, I take them home... it feels good to be able to help. You will carry the good deeds that you do.” These actions show how volunteers take on the role of surrogate caregivers, driven not by obligation but by *pananagutan*.

Even when dealing with difficult parents, volunteers remain committed. “You need to be approachable even if some parents are already calling you names,” one said. Another noted, “If they are saying hurtful things... our President tells us to walk away. Don’t argue. If it’s too much, ask the guard for help.” Despite the tension, the volunteers respond with tolerance and continued service.

These interactions reflect *weak ties* (Granovetter, 1973) that are not emotionally intimate but provide practical, domain-specific benefits—even to children of non-active members. What sustains these efforts is *pananagutan*—a sense of service stronger than personal inconvenience.

The Second Local Norm of Reciprocity: Pakikisama or Cooperation

Pakikisama, or harmonious cooperation, reflects the willingness to prioritize group goals. Volunteers described always being ready to respond when called: “When Pres calls us, we go as long as we have time.” Another added, “Whatever Pres asks us to do, we do. We’re in the school even on Saturdays.”

Volunteers also recognize and build on each other’s strengths. “Some are good at planting, so we let them do that. Another hauls soil. Another is artistic, so she decorates pots made from bottles.” Their collective effort is visible not only in task-sharing but also in daily uniform wearing and having IDs—symbols of shared identity and cohesion.

This strong sense of *samahan* builds *role clarity* and trust, reducing friction and enhancing stability in the PTA’s operations. Volunteers internalize their roles not just as individuals but as a team committed to supporting the school.

The Third Local Norm of Reciprocity: Pakikiramay or Empathy

Pakikiramay, the broadest of the three local norms of reciprocity, emphasizes shared suffering and compassion. Among veteran PTA volunteers—those who had been active for over five years—this norm became especially meaningful during the pandemic. Their long-standing collaboration created strong, kinship-like ties that were tested by job losses, remote learning challenges, and the deaths of loved ones.

Despite the hardship, they relied on each other. “You can say whatever you need to say because you’re already comfortable. You’re able to open up,” one said. These ties provided not only emotional but also material support. They pooled *ayuda*, shared food, and appealed for additional assistance. One volunteer recalled a message in their group chat: “I have sardines here. Who needs it?” Another replied, “Me, I need that.” A volunteer even messaged their Ateneo feeding coordinator: “Ma’am, I think they’re really having a hard time already. They have nothing to eat since they all lost their jobs.”

Their ability to mobilize support—especially through Facebook Messenger—demonstrated how *bonding social capital* worked in practice. They acted as *brokers* (Small, 2009), connecting their network with external aid. These acts of *pakikiramay* show how deep relationships can evolve into survival systems in moments of crisis.

Conclusion

The Formation of Social Capital in the HSES PTA

The formation of social capital among HSES PTA volunteers began as they moved from closed kinship networks into the broader school-based network of the PTA. This shift marked a widening of their “radius of trust” (Realo et al., 2008), as they transitioned from relying solely on family ties to forming relationships based on “trust by proxy” (Small, 2009). The HSES PTA thus served as a space (Flanagin et al., 2006) for parents to socialize beyond their immediate circles and build ties with others from diverse backgrounds. As a civic association, the PTA reflected Putnam’s (2000) argument that active participation in such groups fosters social capital. It became part of what Murray et al. (2019) call a “virtuous cycle,” where trust and participation generate new social resources accessible to the broader school community.

Organizational embeddedness was key. The PTA’s role as a sub-organization of the school created conditions where members could form both weak and strong ties—depending on the frequency and intensity of engagement (Small, 2009). The school’s ability to set norms and implement policies influenced the ties formed among volunteers. Through mandated structures and school-designed engagements, the PTA provided both opportunity and structure for the development of interpersonal trust.

The School’s Role as Enabler of Social Capital

The school’s efforts to respond to contextual challenges—particularly overburdened teachers—while adhering to DepEd mandates served as major enablers of social capital. To address staffing gaps and draw on existing community trust, HSES developed parent engagement programs that mobilized PTA officers and volunteers for non-teaching roles. These programs fostered regular collaboration and expanded the school’s human resource base, particularly in a high-poverty context.

The school's approach aligns with evidence that generalized trust increases civic participation (Murray et al., 2020; Sønderskov, 2011; Uslander & Conley, 2003), and supports Tschannen-Moran et al.'s (2014) conclusion that trust fosters local norms of reciprocity. The HSES PTA became a mechanism for enacting government policy through collaboration, with parents taking on support roles typical in under-resourced schools (Christianakis, 2011). This combination of structural need and social trust gave rise to conditions where social capital could take shape.

School Engagements as Catalysts for Tie Formation

Through school engagements—both face-to-face and online—the PTA volunteers formed internal ties that reflect the structural dimension of social capital. Participation in these engagements placed volunteers in communication networks, particularly Facebook Messenger group chats, where generalized trust was transmitted and weak ties began to form (Granovetter, 1973).

These online channels supported the flow of timely, relevant information, providing an accessible platform for coordination and relationship-building. Just as face-to-face tasks fostered collaboration, these digital spaces also functioned as sites of social capital formation.

The school also sustained external ties, such as its long-standing partnership with Ateneo de Manila University, which persisted even during the pandemic. These external linkages ensured access to additional resources and strengthened the PTA's capacity as a civic association. The nature of the school engagements mattered: *Gulayan sa Paaralan* was identified as the strongest catalyst of tie formation due to the high collaboration and daily interaction it required. Other engagements, such as serving as marshals, proctors, or aides, facilitated moderate collaboration and also contributed to tie formation.

These structured engagements underscore the importance of organizational context in deliberately involving parents in school life and creating opportunities for trust-based ties to develop.

PTA Structures and Mechanisms as Enablers

The structure of the HSES PTA and the leadership style of its officers further enabled social capital formation. PTA officers were seen to lead by example, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual effort—what volunteers described as *samahan* (teamwork). Volunteers' initial motivation often stemmed from wanting to watch over their own children, but over time, their participation evolved into something broader and more collective.

Volunteers described their roles as being guided not by hierarchy, but by informal norms, relationships, and associability (Leana & van Buren, 1999). These social contracts encouraged cooperation and shared responsibility. A clear example of this collective effort is the PTA's involvement in the award-winning *Gulayan sa Paaralan*, which they came to identify as their legacy. Their pride in this initiative illustrates the project's public-good aspect, as harvests from the garden benefit the entire school (DepEd - Quezon City, 2022).

The PTA's commitment to *Gulayan* symbolizes the group's collective efficacy and shared ownership of their contributions to school life. It also signals how internal motivations and organizational support can align to sustain social capital over time.

From Trust to Reciprocity

The school's existing generalized trust provided a foundation for the emergence of local norms of reciprocity, which deepened through repeated collaboration among PTA volunteers. These norms—particularly *pananagutan* (responsibility)—shaped how volunteers navigated their daily duties. Their sustained involvement, despite the demands and challenges of the role, reflects how *pananagutan* became a force that drove continued participation.

As volunteers formed ties through these engagements, social capital solidified as something built through ongoing experience and interpersonal connection.

Mobilizing Social Capital in a Low-Resource Context

The HSES PTA demonstrates how civic associations in less affluent communities can compensate for resource shortages through the formation of social capital. As Noguera (2001) and Coleman (1988) argue, such associations can produce egalitarian outcomes when they mobilize community participation.

Yet, as Murray et al. (2019) remind us, context matters. The PTA's effectiveness at HSES is tied to its embeddedness in a school with limited staff and funding, where help labor provided by volunteers is not just welcome but essential. Consistent with Christianakis (2011), PTA volunteers in such contexts take on practical, day-to-day responsibilities that directly reduce teachers' workloads.

Through these contributions, PTA volunteers become both a **resource to the school** and **embodiments of social capital**, formed through local norms of reciprocity and made possible by enabling structures, shared motivations, and institutional trust.

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