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Informal social capital building in local employment services: Its role in the labour market integration of disadvantaged young people

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Abstract

This article focuses on the role that local employment services (LES) play in informal social capital building for young people with a disadvantaged social background. The personal networks of these young people usually embed few useful resources for labour market integration, and LES actions may be an opportunity to informally build a network of contacts with better resources. To explore this possibility, biographical interviews were conducted with 24 young adults who used LES actions, and their employment trajectories were analysed. The findings highlight that these actions—especially those consisting of training or internships—provide social capital that is useful for labour market (re)integration. Linking social capital is the type of social capital that is most useful for job seeking, and it is especially effective in non-metropolitan rural areas.

KEYWORDS

biographical interviews, disadvantaged youth, job seeking, local employment services, social capital, young adults

1 | INTRODUCTION

Youth joblessness has been a focus of policy interventions at least since the 1980s (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011). However, the long-lasting effects of the Great Recession have increased concern about the risks of unemployed

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young people entering a spiral of labour market exclusion in the medium and long term (Chacaltana & Dasgupta, 2021). This article analyses data obtained in qualitative fieldwork prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to show the extent to which exclusion from the labour market can be mitigated by social capital generated by measures taken by local employment services (LES).

The scientific literature shows few examples of local policies explicitly designed for social capital building that are useful for fighting labour market exclusion, and their outcomes are mixed (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011; Lindsay, 2010; Phillips, 2010). However, local employment policies may also indirectly and informally generate personal connections (i.e., social capital) that are useful for labour market integration. The study reported in this article aims to add to the existing research on social capital-building policies by focusing on informal generation of social capital through actions aimed at young people with special difficulties in labour market (re)integration. To our knowledge, the theoretical and methodological elements we articulated to meet the proposed objective are novel in the study of social capital obtained through policies and actions carried out by LES and their effects on the integration of young people in the labour market.

To carry out the study, young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 who visited LES in Catalonia, Spain to obtain career guidance, training or an internship were interviewed. The methodological approach was based on the use of semi-structured interviews with a strong biographical component focusing on the employment trajectory. This biographical approach also provided rich and detailed information regarding the use of social capital throughout the employment trajectory. It considered the type of contacts that were mobilised, their characteristics, and whether or not they were acquired within the framework of the actions of LES.

2 | DISADVANTAGED YOUNG PEOPLE, JOB SEEKING AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The specific research on the role of personal networks for job seeking and labour market integration goes back to the seminal work of Granovetter (1973), who identified the importance of non-redundant personal connections for obtaining information about employment opportunities. In his view, and in the view of many other authors who have followed in his footsteps, personal networks are an important source of social support for getting a job. In this context, social capital usually refers to the network of personal connections that may be helpful to obtain specific (individual or collective) goals (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Lin, 1999; Portes, 1998), such as getting a job.

However, the term social capital is currently highly polysemic, encompassing at least two main conceptions. First, we find the conception inspired by Bourdieu (1986), which considers that social capital is the set of contacts who have and give access to resources that individuals do not own directly. Social capital is thus itself a resource (like economic capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital) that is unevenly distributed amongst people (Lin, 2001). Second, we find the conception inspired by Putnam (1995), which understands social capital as the capacity of a social group or a collective (or even a society) to maintain group cohesion and identity. In this conception, social capital is a collective characteristic (or resource), whereas the first conception understands it as an individual characteristic (or resource). However, we should not lose sight of the fact that in the second conception the connectivity between people and the networks in which they participate forms part of the dimensions considered (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000), so it is not only a cultural or symbolic conception. Furthermore, although in its theoretical definition the distinction between the collective and individual conception is clear, the indicators used when these approaches are transferred to both quantitative and qualitative empirical research are often the same (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010; Ryan & Junker, 2019). It can thus be stated that the two conceptions share the idea that social capital is “a resource for someone to achieve a set goal that otherwise would not be attainable” (Graham et al., 2015: 771). In our study we use this connotation of a resource embedded in the network of contacts of individuals that is unevenly distributed amongst people.

A useful conceptual classification when one is dealing with the unequal distribution of social capital amongst people is the distinction between bonding, bridging and linking social capital (Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Woolcock, 2001). This categorisation is based on two main features: (1) proximity to the individual, linked to the environment in which the contact or interaction occurs, and (2) unequal access to certain positions or situations of power, that is, the horizontality/verticality of the relationship. Bonding social capital refers to strong ties between members of the same social environment (e.g., a family) who have similar access to resources (horizontality). Bridging social capital refers to weak ties between people who do not share the same social environment but have a similar status (so there is also horizontality in their relationship). Finally, linking social capital is also considered a type of weak tie, but one in which hierarchical or status differences operate, so there is a relative difference between individuals in terms of power or access to resources (Woolcock, 2001). This distinction is useful for highlighting the relationship between people's social background and the characteristics of the social capital they own: in general terms, people with a disadvantaged social background tend to maintain a higher proportion of bonding contacts (Lukasiewicz et al., 2019; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), which are poorer in resources because of their homophilic characteristics (McPherson et al., 2001). In the process of job seeking, bonding social capital brings pre-existing social inequalities to the labour market and reinforces initial social inequalities (Degenne & Forsé, 1999; Verhaeghe et al., 2013). Moreover, the most effective support for unemployed young people comes from employed people (Cingano & Rosolia, 2012), and especially from those with a higher status (Bolíbar et al., 2019; Lukasiewicz et al., 2019; MacDonald et al., 2005). This highlights the importance of bridging and linking contacts for disadvantaged young people. Hence, the distinction between bonding, bridging and linking can be used to assess the type of social capital that may be needed to overcome potential situations of labour market exclusion, taking into account the specific needs of the group considered (Lukasiewicz et al., 2019; MacDonald et al., 2005).

Because the personal network of contacts is an important resource for job seeking, measures and programmes have been implemented in some countries to explicitly seek to develop sociability and social connections of unemployed people. These measures are usually called social capital-building policies (Canduela et al., 2015; Lindsay, 2010; Phillips, 2010). The rationale behind these policies is that unemployed people will obtain from these newly built connections different kinds of support—advice, information, mediation and so on—to help them return to employment. However, the outcomes of these measures are unclear. One explanation may be that social capital-building policies focus on providing access to social capital, whilst in disadvantaged communities individual and structural barriers may hinder the chances of mobilising social capital or using it effectively even when it has been made accessible (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011; Lukasiewicz et al., 2019). Indeed, developing social connections does not necessarily provide access to the resources that people need to find a job (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011), so efforts to expand personal networks may be futile. In this context, it is important to distinguish between accessed social capital and mobilised social capital (Lin, 1999; Pena-López & Sánchez-Santos, 2017). Accessed social capital refers to the network of contacts acquired by an individual, whilst mobilised social capital refers to contacts that provide useful resources, for example, for finding a job. Moreover, it is worth remembering that a good network of contacts does not always make it possible to overcome individual characteristics that are more important in labour market integration, such as origin (autochthonous or foreign) and educational level (Bonoli & Turtschi, 2015). Furthermore, measures designed to increase social capital may be irrelevant for returning to employment in contexts of high unemployment if they are not accompanied by actions aimed at economic recovery and job creation (Lindsay, 2010).

In contrast to research into the outcomes of policies seeking explicitly to improve access to social capital, this article focuses on social capital that is developed informally (and therefore unintentionally) within the framework of local employment policies. In addition, the approach developed focuses on the social capital that is effectively mobilised in the first years of the employment trajectory (not that to which the individuals have access). Therefore, the objective of our research was to establish whether the employment policies aimed at young people with difficulties in finding employment may indirectly lead to the development of contacts with people who have a job or who maintain close contact with the labour market. As earlier research findings suggest (Bolíbar et al., 2019; Cingano & Rosolia, 2012), these contacts may facilitate the labour market integration of young people. We used a qualitative

approach, which allowed us to obtain very specific and detailed information on the dimensions and characteristics of the people who were useful contacts for finding a job. This wealth of information allowed us to classify and analyse the role played by the different types of social capital and to identify whether the contacts used were acquired in the context of the programmes carried out in the LES.

Because the study aimed to identify the sources of the unequal distribution of social capital, we took into account the individual and context characteristics that mark the access to and use of social capital as a resource for the transition to employment. These variables are associated with the position that people hold in the social structure, which limits or favours the access to and mobilisation of social capital (Lin, 2001). Hence, being a woman or an immigrant involves having a less extensive network, with less social diversity and more strong ties (i.e., bonding contacts) (Lin, 2001). Furthermore, social habitat (urban or rural) also influences the possibility of mobilising instrumental social capital (Pena-López & Sánchez-Santos, 2017). The variety of social outlets and socialisation opportunities in urban areas favours the development of weak ties (i.e., bridging or linking contacts) (Brady, 2015). However, the density of personal networks in rural areas is higher, prompting the role of trust and endorsements in social relations (Degenne & Forsé, 1999). Moreover, urban environments are linked to social closure in ethnic enclaves, in which homophilic and bonding contacts prevail, often playing against access to social capital beyond the circle of the ethnic enclave (Li, 2004). These factors were taken into account in the analysis.

3 | CONTEXTUALISING LOCAL EMPLOYMENT SERVICES IN SPAIN

In Spain, LES are local organisations linked to city councils. They are usually of two types: services that form part of the council's economic development department and those that are autonomous but have links with the city council (Vallecillo Gámez, 2017).

These entities date back to the first regional initiatives for local and economic development of the 1980s, which in the 1990s led to the first local employment initiatives, mainly organised by the city councils (Albuquerque, 2002; Vázquez Barquero, 1993). Currently, LES implement at the local level a large part of the active labour market policies in Spain, with varying levels of effectiveness (Lope Peña, 2013; Vallecillo Gámez, 2017). Their role is different from that of Public Employment Services, where unemployed people must register to receive unemployment benefit. Indeed, unemployed people go to LES voluntarily to improve their chances of getting a job without any economic incentive or compensation. Their main functions are to facilitate the labour market integration of unemployed people and to advise local companies on recruitment. Currently, depending on the area, these functions are either performed by different services or integrated in a single service. When the services are offered separately, mediation or placement agencies normally serve as a link between job seekers and local companies. However, there are also fully integrated employment services, such as those presented in this article. The main functions of these integrated services in relation to the unemployed are as follows:

1. Counselling and individualised attention, in which the person receives guidance on possible training and job-seeking resources.
2. Training adapted to people's training needs, including general labour resources and skills and basic vocational training courses. Internships within some of these training courses bring unemployed people in contact with local companies.
3. Management of job offers, acting as mediation/placement agencies between unemployed people and local companies. The LES have an employment exchange with offers from local companies and act as intermediaries between their users and the companies.

Counselling and managing of job offers are carried out by case workers of LES, who become an important reference for the unemployed people registered in these services. In some cases, training is also given by case workers,

but it is usually given by external teachers. In addition to these services, some LES offer services to improve the competitiveness of companies and manage local labour market observatories. Here we have focused on services aimed at unemployed people and particularly the young unemployed.

4 | METHODS

4.1 | Fieldwork and data

The research fieldwork was based on interviews with young people with a working-class origin who had visited an LES at least once looking for support for labour market integration. Six LES in Catalonia, Spain were chosen according to two variables: (1) whether the LES was in a metropolitan or non-metropolitan area, and (2) the population size of the municipality where the LES was located (2000 to 10,000, 10,001 to 50,000 or more than 50,000). The three metropolitan municipalities are located in the inner metropolitan ring of Barcelona. Of the non-metropolitan municipalities, the medium-sized municipality is 68 kilometres from Barcelona, whilst the other two are approximately 45 kilometres from the capital. The small-sized and medium-sized municipalities in the non-metropolitan area are located in a rural context, whilst the large-sized municipality is more urban. The research design also included individual and group interviews with the technical staff of each selected LES (6 interviews). Interviews with technical staff focused on the role that social capital played in the design and implementation of actions carried out within each LES and on the particular characteristics of the geographical area where the LES were located. These interviews are not the focus of the analysis presented in the article and are used only to better understand the actions taken by the interviewees and to better contextualise the effects of these actions on their trajectories.

With regard to young job seekers, the initial objective was to conduct interviews with four young people in the municipality of every LES who met the following conditions: (1) they had participated in an action carried out by an LES; and (2) they had at least 3 years of labour market experience, with a strong presence of unemployment, temporary employment or inactivity. In addition, in each municipality we tried to obtain a balanced sample of autochthonous people and people of foreign origin.

This balance was not possible for every specific municipality because it was difficult to find volunteers, especially in the small municipalities. Nevertheless, overall, an even distribution of interviewees by metropolitan and non-metropolitan area and by origin (autochthonous or foreign) was achieved: 12 people per area and 6 people per origin within each area (see Table 1). Moreover, a balance was sought between men and women in the sample (14 men and 10 women). However, as we note further in the Discussion section, we were unable to consider gender in the analysis owing to the few employment-related spells of the women interviewed. Finally, the young people interviewed were characterised either by a low level of education (15 cases no higher than ISCED 2, of which 5 with school drop-out); or a medium level of education (9 cases with ISCED 3) obtained after a period of school dropout and after the advice offered by the LES led them to improve their level of education.

Table 1 shows the final distribution of the interviews, which were conducted between July and October 2019. The identifier of each interviewee includes whether the person interviewed was male or female (M or W), whether the origin was autochthonous or foreign (A or F), whether the population size of the LES municipality was small, medium or large (S, M or L), and whether the area was metropolitan or non-metropolitan (MA or nMA). When more than one person had the same profile, the identifiers are numbered (see Table A1 of the Appendices for further details of the profile of each young adult interviewed).

The interviews were semi-structured and of a retrospective biographical nature, focusing on the experience of young people in the LES and their employment trajectories between leaving school and the time of the interview. All interviews with young people were conducted face-to-face, one-to-one, and digitally recorded. The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 min, depending on the employment trajectory of the interviewees. The interviews

TABLE 1 Interviews with young people according to area, population size of the municipality in which the LES were located and origin.

Area	Population size of municipality	Autochthonous origin	Foreign origin
Metropolitan area	2001–10,000: SMA	MA_SMA1	WF_SMA
		MA_SMA2	
	10,001–50,000: MMA	WA_MMA	MF_MMA1
		MA_MMA1	MF_MMA2
		MA_MMA2	MF_MMA3
	More than 50,000: LMA	WA_LMA	WF_LMA
		MF_LMA	
Non-metropolitan area	2001–10,000: SnMA	WA_SnMA1	—
		WA_SnMA2	
		WA_SnMA3	
	10,001–50,000: MnMA	MA_MnMA	WF_MnMA1
			WF_MnMA2
			MF_MnMA1
			MF_MnMA2
	More than 50,000: LnMA	MA_LnMA1	WF_LnMA
		MA_LnMA2	MF_LnMA
Total interviews:		24	

were conducted in places familiar to the interviewees (cafés, bars, etc.) or at the premises of the LES. The interviews were not transcribed, because the audio recordings were directly analysed with the ATLAS.ti software. Compliance with ethical standards was ensured and an informed consent and non-disclosure agreement was signed by the interviewer and the interviewee. Young people were selected by the staff of each LES, according with the selection criteria presented above. The participants selected could have a job or not at the time of the interview. A life history grid (Parry et al., 1999) was used as a support at the beginning of the interview to help recall. This instrument consists of a temporal grid in which all the biographical events of the interviewee's labour market trajectory are located in an orderly manner over time (Figure A1 of the Appendices shows an example of one of the life history grids drawn up). This tool allowed the young people to remember and reconstruct their employment trajectories, noting all the event types included in the interview guideline (education, training, jobs, experience in the LES, contacts acquired and mobilised, etc.).

4.2 | Analysis

The analysis of the recorded interviews followed the procedure of qualitative content analysis, using the ATLAS.ti software. In the first step, the following information was coded: (1) employment-related spells that occurred during the employment trajectory of the interviewees, such as jobs, training courses and unemployment spells; (2) actions that were carried out in the LES, such as counselling, training and internships, and the resources acquired directly in these actions (e.g., diplomas and work experience) or indirectly in the form of social capital (accessed social capital); (3) resources mobilised to achieve a specific state in the trajectory (this included social capital but also training credentials, for instance); and (4) contextual and personal information that allowed us to understand the employment-related spells described in the interview. This categorised information was later placed in a matrix representing each individual trajectory, which allowed us to identify the resources used in the transitions in the trajectories and to undertake a comparative analysis between the interviewees (Muñoz & Verd, 2021). This individual matrix was complemented by the narrative descriptions of the employment trajectories, which allowed us to maintain a holistic and

comprehensive approach to each trajectory. Table A2 of the Appendices shows the main categories used in the analysis of individual trajectories and Table A3 shows an example of one matrix of an individual trajectory.

In the second step, each of the interviewees' employment trajectories was graphically reconstructed from the individual comparative matrices and the coded employment-related spells using the ATLAS.ti software. Figure 1 shows an example of this type of graphic representation. This analysis made it possible to sequentially identify the resources that were acquired (and where) and the resources that were mobilised in each event of the trajectories, differentiating between whether these resources were relational (and whether bonding, bridging or linking) or of another type (information, credentials, work experience, etc.). The example in Figure 1 shows the trajectory of a young woman with an ISCED 2 educational level who obtained unskilled jobs (house cleaning) at the beginning of her employment trajectory, using a bonding contact (her mother). Later, the actions carried out in the LES (three training actions and one internship) provided her with a linking contact (an internship adviser) and a first job, from which she acquired a bridging contact (a workmate). Later on, the mobilisation of both these contacts helped her to obtain the job she held at the time of the interview.

Finally, in the third step, a comparative analysis of the role of LES in the acquisition of social capital mobilised to obtain employment by young people was carried out. In addition, each job was identified by the area, sex and origin corresponding to the interviewee. Table 2 shows the categories used in this third step.

In the Results section, the information regarding all the trajectories analysed is shown in the form of two summary tables. These tables do not address the role played by bonding contacts in employment trajectories because they are not a type of social capital that is acquired in LES and are therefore not considered in the objectives of this article.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Social capital and local employment services

The analysis allowed us to identify the type of actions carried out in LES that led to the acquisition of social capital that was later mobilised to obtain a job during the employment trajectories. We identified three types of action: counselling and advice, training courses and internships. Following the information of Table 3, we review in this section the type of social capital obtained in each type of action carried out within LES. In the next section, we will explain the use and mobilisation of this social capital throughout the trajectory according to the geographical areas in which the LES were located.

Table 3 shows that counselling actions seem to have generated only one type of contact: counsellors of the LES. These are linking contacts, because their socioeconomic status is higher than that of the young people they work with. In theory, the counsellors should not be considered an addition to the personal connections network because they have a professional relationship with the young people. However, in some cases, we identified a more intense relationship of monitoring and accompaniment towards the young person, leading to a mediation function that went beyond the duties of these professionals. A personal link was established between the counsellors and the counselled young people, in which the former were incorporated into the personal support networks of the latter (MF_MMA2, MF_MnMA1, MF_MnMA2, WF_MnMA1). This acquired contact was particularly important for young people of foreign origin. Because of the weak personal networks of these people and their poor knowledge of the labour market, counsellors were a significant source of information and mediation for them. This important role of counsellors as providers of resources beyond their professional duties is shown in the following statements by two different interviewees:

'I've been here at the LES and I know them all. I could name them all [counsellors]. I give them 100 out of 10. *Why are they so important to you?* Because they've given me a direction to follow, because I didn't know what to do'. (MF_MMA2)

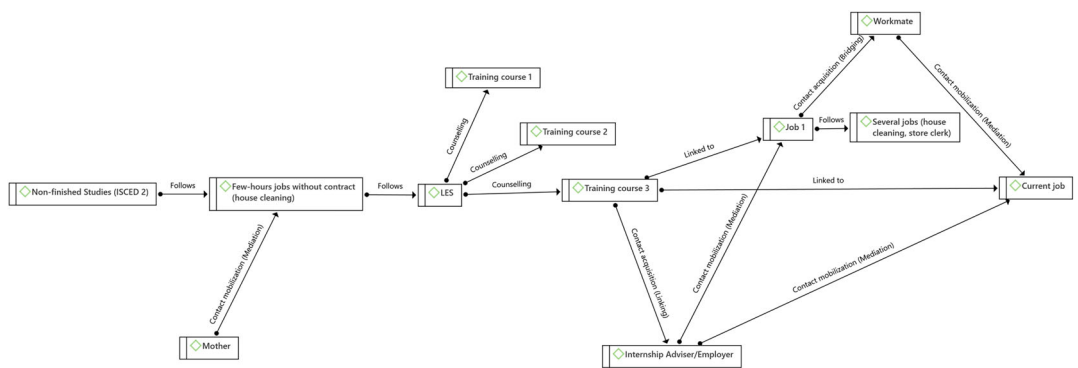


FIGURE 1 Example of trajectory analysis (WA_SnMA1: simplified trajectory with bridging and linking contacts acquired in LES actions). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.12900)]

TABLE 2 Categories of the comparative matrix (for each job obtained by means of mobilising social capital).

Employment event	Mobilised social capital	Characteristics of personal contact	Type of social capital	Type of LES action (where social capital was acquired)	Support from personal contacts
Employment description	Identification of personal contact	Career Counsellor Classmate Employer Family Friends Internship adviser Neighbour Trainer Workmate	Bonding Bridging Linking	Counselling Internship Training	Job information Job mediation Job opportunities

‘This guidance has been very useful. Why? For everything. I didn’t feel like she was an LES worker. I felt like I was talking to a sister. I know it’s her job, but she went out of her way to help me. She was very good’. (WF_MnMA1)

The interviews also show that the training received directly from or through LES facilitated the acquisition of personal connections, some of which were later mobilised to obtain a job. In this type of action, both bridging and linking contacts were obtained. Bridging contacts were established with classmates who were met mainly in training activities carried out in the LES, and in some cases in vocational training courses to which the LES had referred the young people. These contacts offered support mainly by providing information on jobs (MF_MMA1, MF_MMA3, MA_MnMA). The linking contacts were the trainers of the courses (MA_MnMA), who have a dual advantage: they know the labour market linked to the training (in some cases, they even offered jobs to their students); and they know the skills, attitudes and motivations of their students. Moreover, the jobs identified in the trajectory obtained through these contacts had better working conditions than those obtained through classmates. The function of these linking contacts is that of mediation, allowing young people to access jobs related to the training they have received and to their own interests:

‘We had a teacher who taught us [...] And he was the one who sent me many job offers, “Look, are you interested in going to a fair this week...” Is he a teacher? Yes, he’s a teacher who works there’. (MA_MnMA)

TABLE 3 Characteristics of social capital mobilised, classified as bridging and linking contacts according to LES actions through which contacts were acquired.

		LES actions		
		Counselling	Training	Internships
Type of social capital	Bridging contacts	—	Classmates providing information about jobs (MF_MMA1, MF_MMA3, MN_MnMA)	Workmates within the company of the internship providing job mediation (WN_SnMA2)
	Linking contacts	LES counsellors, providing job mediation, even referrals in some cases (MF_MMA2, MF_MnMA1, MF_MnMA2, WF_MnMA1)	External teachers providing job mediation (MA_MnMA)	Internship advisers providing job mediation and job offers (MA_MMA1, MA_SMA1, MA_SMA2) Employers recruiting young people (WA_SnMA2, WF_MnMA2) or providing job mediation (WA_SnMA1) after a successful internship A costumer in a store where internship was done, providing a job offer (WA_MMA)

Regarding internships, it is important to highlight that they did not play the role of a first step towards employment in the host companies, because they were too short to convince companies to recruit interns. Moreover, little employment for unskilled young people was available because of the long-lasting effects of the 2008 economic recession in Spain (Santamaría, 2018). The interviews also show the legal and/or administrative difficulties that some young people of foreign origin encountered in being hired by companies. In these cases, the priority for the LES is to obtain the necessary documentation for the young persons to work legally. However, internships were useful for acquiring contacts who were helpful to find a job. They generated mainly linking contacts but also bridging contacts. The bridging contacts were young people they met in their internships (WA_SnMA2). They were people with similar skills to the interviewees and they remained as contacts after the internship. In some cases, they had mediated in obtaining a job. The linking contacts acquired in internships had two profiles: internship advisers and employers. The internship advisers were workers of the host companies, who were supervising unemployed young people during their internship. They had similar resources to those of external trainers (they knew the young people and the labour market), but they had a greater capacity to mediate, and in some cases to hire by directly offering a job (MA_MMA1, MA_SMA1, MA_SMA2). Employers (the owners or managers of companies) were obviously the persons with the greatest capacity to offer jobs (WA_SnMA1, WA_SnMA2, WF_MnMA2). They were usually jobs linked to the career profile of the young people, contributing to an employment trajectory that was more coherent with their training. The mobilisation of these contacts even marked a turning point in some employment trajectories. Internships were therefore an important source of contacts for the young people, although with differences by geographical area, as we will see in the next section:

'I was hired because one person talked to the manager. If that person hadn't expressed her satisfaction with me during the internship, I wouldn't have been hired. She was a nurse. She talked to the manager, "Hey, hire this guy because he works well". If this person hadn't said it, I wouldn't be working here right now. *Did she know you?* Yes, she was my internship adviser, she saw that I liked the job, that I was very curious, and she said I was a good candidate'. (MA_MMA1)

5.2 | The geographical dimension in the use of bridging and linking contacts

We have seen how LES can contribute to the indirect generation of social capital. But it is also important to consider the type of support that young people obtain from these contacts in their employment trajectories. This support depends on the characteristics of the social capital, but also on other factors. Of the factors considered in the analysis, the most immediate local context seems to explain the differences detected in the mobilisation of social capital and the support obtained, although certain differences were also marked between autochthonous and foreign people. Table 4 shows the support obtained from personal contacts according to the area in which the LES were located (metropolitan or non-metropolitan) and the type of social capital. Below, we provide a detailed explanation of these relationships.

Table 4 shows that linking contacts provided more valuable support than bridging contacts. Bridging contacts provided primarily job information and, to a lesser extent, job mediation. In some trajectories, the jobs obtained through contacts such as classmates were low-skilled temporary jobs and even irregular jobs (MF_MMA1, MF_MMA3):

'I've met all of them [classmates]. I've become a friend with all of them. And some of them have a garage at home and they have acquaintances who give them their car to fix it. And they've often called me and we've fixed their neighbour's or somebody else's car, and you make a little money'. (MF_MMA3)

In other cases, corresponding to non-metropolitan rural areas, the jobs obtained through bridging contacts were more related to the training profile of the young people (MA_MnMA, WA_SnMA2).

'He [a classmate] told me, "Man, if you want a job [information about which was provided by the classmate], try it. Because now in summer, as people are leaving, you can be there for four or five months". *And you still have a relationship with him?* Yes, with almost all of my friends, because I already consider them friends, almost all of them [classmates]. We still see each other'. (MA_MnMA)

The comparative analysis of employment trajectories shows that non-metropolitan rural areas were more conducive to profitably mobilising bridging contacts obtained in training courses and internships than other areas. The reasons that may explain this finding are addressed below.

The linking contacts identified basically offered job mediation and job offers during the employment trajectories of the young people. The persons who provided this type of support were trainers, counsellors, internship advisers and employers. In general, the latter were contacts mobilised sometime after the internship or training had ended. Linking contacts were used greatly in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. However, in metropolitan areas trainers and employers only offered employment directly (WA_MMA, MA_SMA1, MA_SMA2), whilst in non-metropolitan rural areas they also offered referrals, which are an added resource for labour market integration that is especially important in young people with few embedded resources in their personal network, such as young people of foreign origin (WA_SnMA1, MF_MnMA2).

TABLE 4 Support obtained from personal contacts according to the geographical area where the LES were located and the type of social capital.

	Type of social capital	
	Bridging contacts	Linking contacts
Metropolitan area	Job information provided by classmates leading to unstable and low- and unskilled jobs (MF_MMA1, MF_MMA3)	Job mediation provided by LES counsellors (MF_MMA2) and internship advisers (MA_MMA1) Job offers from trainers and employers subsequent to an internship (WA_MMA, MA_SMA1, MA_SMA2)
Non-metropolitan area	Job information provided by a classmate of a previous training course (MA_MnMA) Job mediation provided by a workmate of a company where the young woman did an internship (WA_SnMA2)	Job mediation provided by external trainers of a vocational training course (MA_MnMA) and LES counsellors (MF_MnMA1, WF_MnMA1). In some cases, the counsellor referred the worker (MF_MnMA2) Referral by an employer/internship adviser where the young woman had previously done her internship (WA_SnMA1) Job offers from employers of a previous internship (WA_SnMA2, WF_MnMA2)

‘There we met the cook who supervised us in the course. He was working there and came in just as I was doing the job interview. He saw me and said, “Hi, how are you?” The interviewer was surprised and asked him if he knew me. Then the sky opened up for me. He said to the interviewer, “Take her, in my course she was the only who paid attention”. Two days later they called me and hired me. He was my guardian angel!’ (WA_SnMA1)

Overall, the data suggest that non-metropolitan rural areas were more conducive to mobilisation of linking social capital for access to employment, especially for young people with special difficulties in gaining access to the world of employment. In these areas, although bridging social capital was a useful resource, linking social capital was more effective because it was a source of referrals that employers took into consideration. This greater importance of social capital in these non-metropolitan areas could be explained by the higher density of personal networks associated with the rural context of the LES municipalities. This is coherent with the information obtained from LES case workers in these areas, who mentioned the importance of trust relationships and the fact that everyone knows one another. Moreover, the greater presence of small companies with more paternalistic management styles (Gibert, 2014) reinforces the role of trust in the decision of an employer to hire someone. Therefore, informal mediation, referrals and word of mouth are used more by the interviewees in non-metropolitan rural areas than in metropolitan areas as a mechanism to access employment.

6 | DISCUSSION

The qualitative methodological approach adopted in the present study provided rich and detailed information on the type of social capital acquired by the interviewees through the actions carried out by the LES, in addition to the characteristics of the contacts and how and when in the trajectory the social capital was mobilised. However, some limitations must be considered in the study. First, as stated above, despite our initial intention to address the differences

in the use of social capital between men and women, we did not have enough employment-related spells for women to identify a different pattern amongst them. A larger sample would be needed to obtain meaningful distinctive patterns and to generalise them (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Second, the employment trajectories studied in the sample were marked by the context of employment scarcity in Spain produced by the Great Recession, which particularly struck young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and caused short-length employment trajectories (Salvà-Mut et al., 2016; Verd et al., 2019). This obviously affected the outcomes of the mobilisation of social capital generated by LES actions.

The results of the analysis show that it is mainly in training and internships that young people with a disadvantaged background can acquire bridging and linking contacts that may improve the possibilities of labour market (re) integration. Although the support obtained from the bridging contacts with former training or internship mates is not particularly helpful because of their homophily, they convey information about job vacancies, thus building bridges to the labour market. The data analysis suggests that it is mostly in non-metropolitan areas that former classmates make relevant recommendations or mediate with their employers in favour of people they met in training, underscoring their role as occupational contacts (Hällsten et al., 2017).

However, it is the linking contacts that prove to be the most valuable resources for getting a job. These contacts are mainly acquired in training courses and internships, but also in counselling offered by LES. Although the help offered by LES counsellors forms part of their jobs, in some cases they go beyond their institutional role to join the personal networks of young people and become providers of support (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2020). In these cases, LES counsellors become a kind of informal mentors, even though they are not aware of it. This is related to the importance of informal mentoring for disadvantaged young people, as reported by Inzer and Crawford (2005), who showed that beyond the importance of mentoring programmes for the most vulnerable youth profiles (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006), informal mentoring seems to be more beneficial than formal mentoring because it is usually between people who can easily identify with each other and involves longer-term relationships.

In addition, external trainers, internship advisers and employers were also identified as linking contacts. Contacts with external trainers are generated in training courses provided by LES and external institutions, and contacts with internship advisers and employers are generated in internships organised through LES. All these linking contacts perform functions of mediation and endorsement, and trainers and employers sometimes hire young people directly.

The results also show that the social capital generated is especially effective in areas where informal mechanisms and trust networks play a significant role in access to employment (Vacchiano, 2021), which in our case we identified as non-metropolitan rural areas. This fact shows the importance of considering the influence of the geographic and spatial dimension in the generation and mobilisation of social capital (Pena-López & Sánchez-Santos, 2017; Vandecasteele & Fasang, 2021), together with personal characteristics and the type of social capital mobilised.

Therefore, the data analysis suggests that the support obtained from the social capital generated in LES seems to have a greater impact on the employment trajectories of young people who live in non-metropolitan rural areas or have particularly weak personal networks. The fact that these young people interact in environments less connected to the labour market means that their relationship with LES may have a greater impact on their employment trajectories. However, this impact was in general limited in the set of trajectories analysed, largely because other aspects are more important than social capital in the integration or reintegration of unemployed young people in the labour market (Bonoli & Turttschi, 2015; Verhaeghe et al., 2013). Only when several types of resources were combined (e.g., social capital and training) were significant positive impacts on the trajectory identified.

7 | CONCLUSION

As a result of the reiteration of situations of unemployment and inactivity, young adults with a disadvantaged social background tend to have little access to the most useful social connections (i.e., social capital) for getting a job, such as workers with a higher status or employers (Bolíbar et al., 2019; Lindsay, 2010). Our findings highlight that young

people with this profile may acquire this kind of social capital as a side-effect of their participation in the actions they carry out within LES, insofar as counselling, training courses and internships allow the (unintended) creation of resourceful social connections. In a qualitative study like this one, the relative contribution of this social capital building to the labour market integration of the young people considered is not easy to disentangle from the contribution of the other resources provided by LES, but this should not negate the role played by it. Indeed, our results show that the most useful contacts are acquired in the framework of training courses and internships.

These findings show the need to pay more attention to the possibility of generating social capital within the framework of active labour market policies, even when their main objective is not to generate social capital. This allows us to consider that social capital should be developed by organisations that work with young people together with the resources that are traditionally offered. That is, other characteristics and resources, such as training, that are more decisive in the integration of disadvantaged young job seekers in the labour market should not be overlooked. Therefore, comprehensive programmes that allow opportunities for the informal creation of social capital are necessary to overcome situations of labour market exclusion. This recommendation may be complemented by boosting awareness amongst case workers that social capital is a useful resource for labour market integration. This awareness could lead to a greater identification and monitoring of young people's networks of connections during their time in active labour market programmes.

Our findings also show the need to go beyond the broad simplistic terms with which social capital building policies are often considered or designed, as also observed by Canduela et al. (2015). The results obtained in this study show that it is essential to consider the distinction between access to and mobilisation of social capital, the specific characteristics of the social capital generated (bridging or linking), the support obtained from these different types of capital, and the personal circumstances and geographic context that allow these resources to be used. Some of these aspects seem to be neglected in the few examples of policies intended for social capital-building assessed in the literature (Canduela et al., 2015). One of the main problems of these social capital-building programmes may be that they have mostly been aimed at generating trust, social integration or a sense of belonging within the communities or groups to which they have been directed (Warner, 1999); that is to say, they have been directed more towards collective goals of the community instead of individual goals related to the labour market integration of unemployed people. Moreover, even when these policies are set at a more individual or household level, there is a lack of reflection on the type of social capital needed, because it is assumed that any type of support is useful to achieve the objectives considered (Johansson et al., 2012). On the other hand, putting the construction of social capital at the centre of active policies could distort the design of internships or traineeships and fundamentally change the social relationships established, leading to the conclusion that the ideal type of design would be one in which the construction of social capital is an additional dimension of the training actions or internships. The problem of “forcing” sociability and social connections by design has already been identified regarding formal social mentoring programmes, in which evaluations have shown that mentoring established in a regulated and forced way may be ineffective (Inzer & Crawford, 2005). Indeed, as stated above, some of the relations established by young unemployed people with case workers, trainers and internship advisers are close to informal mentoring. Thus, the results of our analysis point in the direction of the benefits of increasing as much as possible the opportunities for informal social capital building in the framework of active labour market policies.

These findings could be transferred to other age groups with a similar disadvantaged social background, as the lack of resources in the personal network of connections occurs in all disadvantaged social groups (Moerbeek & Flap, 2008). Even so, we must not forget that social capital is more important in job seeking amongst young people, and particularly in contexts such as Spain (Alva et al., 2017; Bolibar et al., 2019). This specificity may be related to the lack of experience and first-hand knowledge of the labour market amongst young people, which forces them to require the support or endorsement of already employed workers to gain access to jobs. In this article we have presented a case study on LES, which are local and decentralised employment services, but there is no reason to think that other actions within other policies organised or designed by more centralised services would not have similar effects.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research project from which the article is drawn fully accomplish the ethical standards of the authors' University (Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona), which include obtaining a consent form from every interviewee.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A 1 Profiles of the young people interviewed.

Id		Area	Sex	Age	Origin	Family background	Education (at the beginning of the employment trajectory)	Employment trajectory (length)	LES actions received	Situation at the time of interview
MA_SMA1		Metropolitan	Male	24	Autochthonous	Father: ISCED 1, working as lathe operator Mother: ISCED 2, working as nursing assistant	ISCED 2	8 years	Counselling One training action One internship	Employed, open-ended contract, full-time
MA_SMA2		Metropolitan	Male	28	Autochthonous	Father: ISCED 5, working as mechanic Mother: ISCED 2, working as office cleaner	School drop-out (ISCED 2)	12 years	Counselling Two training actions Two internships	Employed, open-ended contract, full-time
WF_SMA		Metropolitan	Female	26	Foreign	Father: without studies, working as security guard Mother: no education, housewife	ISCED 3	7 years	Counselling Three training actions	Employed, fixed-term contract, full-time
WA_MMA		Metropolitan	Female	27	Autochthonous	Father: ISCED 3, working as technical draughtsman Mother: no education, working as house cleaner	School drop-out (ISCED 2)	9 years	Counselling Three training actions Two internships	Unemployed Training action in LES
MA_MMA1		Metropolitan	Male	26	Autochthonous	Father: ISCED 5, working as storekeeper Mother: ISCED 1, working as factory worker	School drop-out (ISCED 2)	8 years	Counselling One training action One internship	Employed, fixed-term contract, full-time

(Continues)

TABLE A 1 (Continued)

Id		Area	Sex	Age	Origin	Family background	Education (at the beginning of the employment trajectory)	Employment trajectory (length)	LES actions received	Situation at the time of interview
MA_MMA2		Metropolitan	Male	22	Autochthonous	Father: no education, died when the interviewee was 16 Mother: ISCED 1, unemployed	School drop-out (ISCED 2)	5 years	Counselling Five training actions Two internships	Unemployed
MF_MMA1		Metropolitan	Male	27	Foreign	Father: ISCED 2, unspecified jobs, he returned to his home country Mother: ISCED 3, working as administrative assistant	School drop-out (ISCED 2)	9 years	Counselling Two training actions	Unemployed
MF_MMA2		Metropolitan	Male	22	Foreign	Father: ISCED 2, working as factory worker Mother: no education, working as house cleaner	School drop-out (ISCED 2)	5 years	Counselling Two training actions	Employed, fixed-term contract, full-time
MF_MMA3		Metropolitan	Male	21	Foreign	Father: no relationship Mother: ISCED 2, working as house cleaner	School drop-out (ISCED 2)	5 years	Counselling Three training actions One internship	Unemployed Occasional informal jobs
WA_LMA		Metropolitan	Female	25	Autochthonous	Father: ISCED 1, working as carrier Mother: ISCED 1, housewife	ISCED 3	3 years	Counselling Two training actions	Employed, fixed-term contract, part-time
WF_LMA		Metropolitan	Female	19	Foreign	Father: no education, working as construction worker Mother: no education, housewife	School drop-out (ISCED 2)	4 years	Counselling Three training actions	Training action in LES

TABLE A 1 (Continued)

Id		Area	Sex	Age	Origin	Family background	Education (at the beginning of the employment trajectory)	Employment trajectory (length)	LES actions received	Situation at the time of interview
MF_LMA		Metropolitan	Male	26	Foreign	Father: no relationship Mother: no education, working as dressmaker	ISCED 3	5 years	Counselling Two training actions	Employed, open-ended contract, part-time
WA_SnMA1		Non-metropolitan	Female	24	Autochthonous	Father: ISCED 1, unemployed Mother: ISCED 1, unemployed	School drop-out (ISCED 2)	8 years	Counselling Four training actions Two internships	Employed, open-ended contract, full-time
WA_SnMA2		Non-metropolitan	Female	28	Autochthonous	Father: ISCED 2, working as formwork operator Mother: ISCED 1, housewife	ISCED 2	12 years	Counselling Six training actions Two internships	Unemployed
WA_SnMA3		Non-metropolitan	Female	27	Autochthonous	Father: no relationship Mother: ISCED 1, working as waitress	ISCED 3	7 years	Counselling Two training actions	Unemployed Training action in LES
MA_MnMA		Non-metropolitan	Male	23	Autochthonous	Father: ISCED 1, working as concierge Mother: ISCED 1, working as factory worker	ISCED 3	7 years	Counselling Four training actions	Unemployed Training action in LES
WF_MnMA1		Non-metropolitan	Female	25	Foreign	Father: without studies, working as electrician Mother: ISCED 1, housewife	ISCED 3	6 years	Counselling Two training actions One internship	Employed, fixed-term contract, part-time
WF_MnMA2		Non-metropolitan	Female	21	Foreign	Father: without studies, working as construction worker Mother: ISCED 2, working as dressmaker	ISCED 3	6 years	Counselling Two training actions	Employed, open-ended contract, full-time
MF_MnMA1			Male	22	Foreign		ISCED 2	6 years	Counselling	

(Continues)

TABLE A 1 (Continued)

Id	Area	Sex	Age	Origin	Family background	Education (at the beginning of the employment trajectory)	Employment trajectory (length)	LES actions received	Situation at the time of interview
MF_MnMA2	Non-metropolitan	Male	24	Foreign	Father: no education, working as construction worker Mother: no education, housewife	ISCED 3	6 years	Two training actions Two internships	Employed, fixed-term contract, full-time
MA_LnMA1	Non-metropolitan	Male	23	Autochthonous	Father: ISCED 3, working as waiter Mother: ISCED 2, working as nursing assistant	ISCED 3	5 years	Counselling One training action	Unemployed
MA_LnMA2	Non-metropolitan	Male	22	Autochthonous	Father: ISCED 1, working as electrician Mother: ISCED 2, working as caregiver for elderly people	ISCED 2	2 years	Counselling One training action	Employed, fixed-term contract, full-time
WF_LnMA	Non-metropolitan	Female	22	Foreign	Father: no relationship Mother: no relationship	ISCED 2	6 years	Counselling Three training actions One internship	Employed, without contract
MF_LnMA	Non-metropolitan	Male	26	Foreign	Father: ISCED 1, working as factory worker Mother: ISCED 3, housewife	ISCED 2	6 years	Counselling Two training actions	Employed, open-ended contract, full-time

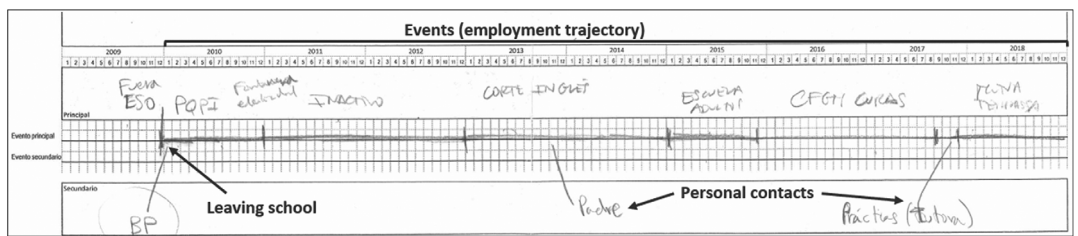


FIGURE A1 Example of a life history grid.

TABLE A2 Categories used in the analysis of individual trajectories (see Table A3).

Type of event	Mobilised social capital (in case of employment event)	Resources acquired (in each event)	Context issues
Unemployment	Identification of personal	Information/counselling	Description of the
Counselling	contacts mobilised to	Credentials	event's context
Training	access employment	Work experience	
Internship		Personal contacts acquired	
Employment		(accessed social capital)	
Labour inactivity			

TABLE A3 Example of analysis of an individual trajectory.

EVENTS			MOBILIZED SOCIAL CAPITAL	RESOURCES ACQUIRED				CONTEXT ISSUES
Year	Type of event	Content		Information/Counselling	Credentials	Work Experience	Personal contacts	
2010	Counselling	First interview with LES	Contact from the high school (teacher)	Information about basic VET studies			Counsellor [Name]	School drop-out
2010	Training	Basic VET studies in electrical training (ISCED 2)	Counsellor [Name]		ISCED 2 Diploma	Internships (1 month)	Classmate [Name]	School drop-out
2011-2012	Labour inactivity	Unwillingness to seek employment	N/A					Lack of motivation
2011-2012	Counselling	Job offers	Counsellors	Information about jobs				Not interested because they are jobs related to VET studies in electricity (Event 2). He doesn't like the electrician's trade
2013-2014	Employment	Storekeeper in [Name company]	Family (father)			24 months		After 2 years of inactivity, his father mediates to achieve this job
2015	Counselling	Orientation towards VET studies	Counsellor [Name]	Information/Orientation about different options of VET studies				
2015	Training	Adult Schools	Counsellor [Name]		ISCED 2 Diploma			Turning point
2016-2017	Training	VET Studies in auxiliary nursing (ISCED 3)	Counsellor [Name]		ISCED 3 Diploma	Internships (3 months)	Nurse (Internship adviser)	Finds "his passion in life"
2018-2019	Employment	Nurse assistant in [Name company]	Nurse (Internship adviser)			18 months		Satisfied with the job.