

Inequality in Higher Education and Social Class Reproduction: Based on Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital

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Abstract: In the context of rapid economic development and social transformation in China, this article, based on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, explores the phenomena of inequality in China's higher education and their impact on the reproduction of social strata. It first analyzes the inequalities in educational opportunities, processes, and outcomes, identifying family background, uneven distribution of educational resources, and deficiencies in the educational assessment system as the main factors contributing to these inequalities. Through empirical data, the article demonstrates how cultural capital is transmitted and accumulated within the education system, thereby affecting individuals' social mobility. Finally, the article proposes a series of policy recommendations, including optimizing the distribution of educational resources, reforming educational training and management systems, and improving educational assessment mechanisms, to reduce educational inequality. It also provides guidance for future research directions. These measures aim to promote educational equity, break the solidification of social strata, and achieve social harmony and progress.

Keywords: Bourdieu; Cultural Capital; Educational Inequality; Social Stratification

1. Introduction

The relationship between education and social mobility. Learning is often seen as a key to climbing the social ladder and has consistently been viewed as a crucial means for individuals to advance in society. It not only provides knowledge and skills but is also key to obtaining social resources and improving social status. In modern society, the relationship between education and social mobility has become particularly complex. As

education becomes more widespread and higher education expands, individuals are increasingly looking to education as a means to enhance their social prospects and facilitate upward mobility. Yet, the availability of educational opportunities is frequently uneven, with factors such as family background, financial status, and social connections influencing both the access to and the quality of education that people can receive. This disparity not only hinders personal growth but also contributes to the rigidification of social strata, raising significant concerns about the equity in education.

1.1 Introduction of Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory

Pierre Bourdieu, a renowned French sociologist, offers a fresh viewpoint through his concept of cultural capital to comprehend disparities in education. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital encompasses the accumulated knowledge and cultural competencies within individuals or social groups, serving as a significant determinant of social hierarchy alongside economic and social capitals. Cultural capital can be manifested in three forms: embodied (such as an individual's knowledge, skills, and educational level), objectified (such as cultural products and collections), and institutionalized (such as academic qualifications and certifications). In the field of education, the transmission and accumulation of cultural capital are particularly important, as it legitimates the culture of the ruling class through the mechanism of school education and reproduces the existing social order and structure.

1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Study

This research aims to examine the issue of educational disparity within China's university system and to investigate how this issue perpetuates social stratification through the

buildup and transfer of cultural capital. The value of this study is in uncovering the societal dynamics that contribute to educational disparities and establishing a theoretical foundation for the development of fairer educational policies. By delving into Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, this paper aims to analyze the phenomenon of educational inequality in the context of the expansion of higher education in China, discuss the accumulation and transmission of cultural capital in higher education in China, reveal how cultural capital affects the reproduction of social classes, propose suggestions for improving educational equity and promoting social mobility.

In summary, this study not only helps to understand the social roots of educational inequality but also has important theoretical and practical value for promoting educational equity and building a harmonious society.

2. Literature Review

Domestic and foreign scholars' research on educational inequality. Educational inequality is a universal issue in the world, and researchers from different countries and regions have conducted extensive discussions on this issue. Abroad, research has focused on the distribution of educational opportunities, the uneven distribution of educational resources, and the impact of education on social mobility. Scholars have found that a family's socioeconomic status largely determines the type and quality of education that children receive, leading to educational inequality. In addition, educational inequality is also reflected in aspects such as gender, race, and region.

In China, with the rapid development of the economy and changes in educational policies, the issue of educational inequality has become increasingly prominent. Researchers have focused on the differences in educational opportunities between urban and rural areas, among different social classes, and between different regions. The rapid expansion of higher education in China has improved the overall level of education, but it has also brought about problems such as a decline in educational quality and difficulties in graduate employment.

Application of cultural capital theory in the field of education. Bourdieu's theory of

cultural capital provides a powerful analytical tool for studying educational inequality. Scholars have used this theory to discuss how family cultural capital affects children's educational achievements. Research shows that a family's cultural capital, including parents' education level, family cultural activities, and educational expectations, has a significant impact on children's academic performance and educational opportunities.

In the field of education, cultural capital is also reflected in the educational process. Schools, as places for the transmission and production of cultural capital, pass on specific cultural values and knowledge systems to students through educational practices. This transmission not only includes explicit knowledge transfer but also the internalization of implicit cultural values and behavioral norms. Bourdieu posits that the educational framework often mirrors and perpetuates the prevailing power dynamics and cultural hierarchies within a society. In essence, the educational framework sustains social disparities by facilitating the inheritance of cultural capital.

3. Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is a core part of his social practice theory, which posits that capital is not only manifested in economic forms but also in cultural forms. Cultural capital can be defined as the power and influence that individuals or groups obtain due to their possession of cultural resources such as education, knowledge, skills, cultural goods, and symbols. Bourdieu divides cultural capital into three forms: embodied (such as an individual's knowledge, skills, and education), objectified (such as books, works of art, and other cultural goods), and institutionalized (such as academic qualifications and titles) [1]. The impact of cultural capital on social stratification and class division. Bourdieu's theory emphasizes the role of cultural capital in social stratification and class division. Bourdieu suggests that cultural capital, acting as a symbolic form of authority, categorizes and differentiates individuals within society through their engagement in cultural domains like education. This differentiation manifests not just in terms of economic and social standing but also in lifestyle choices,

preferences in culture, and patterns of consumption. The extent of one's cultural capital dictates their placement within the social landscape, consequently impacting their social rank and the potential to wield influence [2].

The transmission and impact of cultural capital in education. The education system is the main field for the transmission of cultural capital. Schools pass on specific forms of cultural capital to students through their curriculum settings, teaching methods, and evaluation systems. This process includes not only explicit knowledge transfer but also the internalization of implicit cultural values and behavioral norms. Bourdieu posits that the educational apparatus often perpetuates the current social power structures and cultural rankings, meaning that it reinforces social disparities by passing on cultural capital[3].

In the educational process, family background plays an important role in the transmission of cultural capital. Families accumulate cultural capital for their children through daily interactions, investment in educational resources, and transmission of educational expectations, laying the foundation for their children's learning in school later on. In addition, the selection and evaluation mechanisms in the school education further reinforce the unequal distribution of cultural capital. This mechanism not only affects students' academic achievements but also their career choices and social mobility.[3]

4. The Current Situation of Inequality in Chinese Higher Education

4.1 Inequality in Educational Opportunities

Describe the current situation of educational resource allocation in China. There is a significant imbalance in the allocation of educational resources in China. High-quality educational resources, especially teaching staff, research facilities, and financial investment, are often concentrated in first-tier cities and prestigious universities. In contrast, schools in rural and underdeveloped areas face a shortage of resources. For example, schools in rural areas may lack basic teaching facilities and qualified teachers, which directly affects these students' opportunities to receive high-quality education[4].

The gap between key universities and non-key

universities is mainly reflected in educational quality, research capabilities, and employment prospects. Prestigious universities typically receive greater financial resources and governmental backing, enabling them to draw in top-tier faculty and students and offer a wide range of courses and research possibilities. Non-key universities lag behind in this regard, leading to a significant difference in the social competitiveness of students after graduation[5].

Since 1999, the scale of higher education in China has expanded rapidly, and the gross enrollment rate has increased significantly. However, the expansion policy has also brought a series of problems, such as a decline in educational quality and increased employment pressure. Although the expansion has provided more people with the opportunity to receive higher education, it has also exacerbated the uneven distribution of educational resources, making it more difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to obtain high-quality education[6].

4.2 Inequality in the Educational Process

Discuss the correlation between educational quality and students' family backgrounds.

Educational quality is closely related to students' family backgrounds. A family's socioeconomic status often determines the type and quality of education that students can receive. Students from advantaged families are more likely to have access to abundant educational resources, such as high-quality preschool education, tutoring, and international exchange opportunities, which can improve their educational achievements[7].

The current educational assessment system overemphasizes exam scores and neglects students' comprehensive development and innovative abilities. This exam-oriented education model not only restricts students' creative thinking but also exacerbates the unequal distribution of educational resources because students from affluent families are more capable of improving their exam scores through additional tutoring[8].

The transmission of cultural capital in the educational process is mainly reflected in school culture, teacher expectations, and peer influence. School culture and educational practices often reflect the values and

behavioral norms of the middle class, which gives students from different backgrounds different cultural experiences in school. Teachers' expectations and evaluation criteria may also be influenced by students' cultural backgrounds, thereby affecting students' learning motivation and achievements[9].

4.3 Inequality in Educational Outcomes

Academic qualifications are an important factor affecting employment opportunities. However, with the expansion of higher education, the employment pressure on college graduates is increasing. Graduates from key universities usually have better employment opportunities, while those from non-key universities face greater employment challenges. In addition, with economic development and changes in industrial structure, the demand for high-skilled talents is increasing, while the demand for low-skilled labor is relatively decreasing, which further exacerbates the inequality in educational outcomes[10].

Cultural capital plays an important role in social mobility. Cultural capital obtained through education can help individuals obtain better employment opportunities and social status. However, due to the unequal distribution of educational resources, people from disadvantaged backgrounds often find it difficult to obtain sufficient cultural capital, thereby limiting their social mobility.[10]

Social networks are an important resource in the job-seeking process. Nonetheless, the allocation of social connections is often uneven and frequently correlates with a person's familial lineage and societal standing. People from advantaged backgrounds are more likely to obtain employment information and opportunities through family and social connections, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds are at a disadvantage in this regard[11].

5. Analysis of Cultural Capital Reproduction Mechanism

5.1 Analyze the Accumulation and Transmission Mechanisms of Cultural Capital

The accumulation and transmission of cultural capital are key mechanisms in the social reproduction process. Bourdieu asserts that the

buildup of cultural capital originates within the family unit and is then reinforced and institutionalized through formal education. Within the household, parents convey their cultural assets to their offspring, encompassing linguistic proficiencies, pedagogical approaches, and acquaintance with cultural artifacts and practices. This early cultural nurturing lays the foundation for children's learning in school later on[3].

In school education, the transmission of cultural capital is achieved through curriculum content, teaching methods, and assessment systems. Schools tend to recognize and reward students who are in line with mainstream cultural values and behavioral norms, which usually coincide with the cultural habits of the upper-middle-class family. Therefore, schools inadvertently reproduce social class differences. Furthermore, the mechanisms of selection and streaming within the educational framework also amplify disparities in cultural capital distribution, like assigning students to various educational pathways based on their performance in exams and evaluations.

5.2 Discuss Examples of Cultural Capital Reproduction in the Education System

Examples of cultural capital reproduction in China's education system are very common. For example, elite and well-regarded schools typically possess more abundant educational resources and a superior faculty, making it more probable for students enrolled there to receive superior education and accumulate greater cultural capital. Moreover, these schools often adopt stricter selection criteria, such as competitive entrance exams to select students, which actually strengthens the accumulation and transmission of cultural capital[12].

Another example is the development of the extracurricular tutoring and training market. Children from upper-middle-class families often have more opportunities to participate in various tutoring classes and interest groups, which not only improves their academic performance but also increases their cultural literacy and skills. This additional educational investment further strengthens their cultural capital, thus giving them an advantage in educational competition[12].

5.3 Show the Reproduction Process of Social

Classes Through Empirical Data

The reproduction of social classes is a complex process, which involves the interaction of many social forces and mechanisms. Empirical data provide us with a window into this phenomenon, revealing how family background profoundly affects an individual's educational achievement and future career progression.

First of all, parents' education level, occupational status and income level are key factors that affect children's educational opportunities and academic performance. Children from high socioeconomic status families are more likely to have access to quality educational resources due to having more resources and support. These resources include not only material conditions, such as better school facilities and educational resources, but also non-material conditions, such as the importance families place on education and their expectations for their children's studies. These factors work together to make these children tend to perform better academically, making them more likely to enter prestigious universities and earn higher degrees.

In their 2018 study, Chen and Li pointed out that the education system replicates social class structure to some extent. Analyzing data from China, they found that children from families with higher socioeconomic status were more likely to achieve higher social status through education[13]. This phenomenon is reflected in the education system, as these children tend to have access to more educational opportunities, which increases their likelihood of getting better employment opportunities.

In addition, the transmission of cultural capital is also an important aspect of social class reproduction. In their 2016 study, Zhou and Su explored the role of cultural capital in educational achievement in China[14]. They found that children from upper-middle class families were more likely to be rated positively by teachers for their performance in school, and that these children were also more likely to be recommended for a variety of academic and cultural activities. These activities can not only increase their knowledge and skills, but also improve their social skills, thus accumulating more cultural capital and social opportunities for them.

The accumulation and transmission mechanism of cultural capital has been fully reflected in the education system and strengthened through various educational practices and socialization processes. For example, the curriculum, teaching methods, and evaluation systems in schools may favor students who already have some cultural capital. In addition, the family's social networks and cultural activities also provide children with additional learning opportunities and social occasions that are difficult for families of low socioeconomic status to provide.

Ultimately, these factors work together to produce the reproduction of social classes. Children from high socioeconomic status families have access to more resources and opportunities through the education system, thereby maintaining or advancing their status in society. On the contrary, children from low socioeconomic status families often find it difficult to break the barriers of social class due to the lack of resources and opportunities, and thus fall into the cycle of social class.

This phenomenon poses a challenge to social equity and mobility. In order to break this cycle, interventions at the policy level are needed, such as providing more educational opportunities, improving the distribution of educational resources, and improving the professional development of teachers, to ensure that all children have access to equitable educational opportunities, thereby reducing the impact of social class reproduction.

6. Construction of Solution Mechanism

6.1 Rational Allocation of Educational Resources

Propose optimization plans for the allocation of educational resources. To address the issue of uneven distribution of educational resources, it is necessary to construct a more equitable and rational mechanism for the allocation of educational resources[5]. This entails reassessing and modifying the financial aid policies of both national and regional authorities to ensure equitable access to educational resources for all schools, with a particular focus on those in rural and underprivileged regions. At the same time, it is encouraged to guide high-quality educational

resources to flow to grassroots and remote areas, such as through teacher rotation systems and high-quality course resource sharing platforms.

Discuss the possibility of raising educational funds through multiple channels. In addition to government financial support, it is also possible to explore the possibility of raising educational funds through multiple channels. This includes encouraging enterprises, social organizations, and individuals to donate to education, establishing educational foundations, and investing in education projects through public-private partnership (PPP) models. By employing these strategies, it's possible to enhance the overall quantity of educational resources and to distribute them more effectively and in a more varied manner.

6.2 Recommend the Implementation of Educational Resource Tilt Policies

Regarding the distribution of educational resources, it's advisable to adopt preferential policies targeting students from rural regions, economically disadvantaged areas, and marginalized communities. This could involve allocating additional financial assistance, expanding admission targets, and offering scholarships and grants to guarantee equitable access to education for these demographics[15].

Reform of education training and management systems. Recommend strengthening the role of academic power in educational management. Educational management should place greater emphasis on academic power and reduce administrative intervention. Strengthening academic authority can be accomplished by providing professors with increased freedom in their teaching and research endeavors, and by involving them more significantly in the decision-making processes related to education. This can improve the quality of education and innovation capabilities, and promote academic freedom and competition.

Propose specific measures for the transformation of management models. The transformation of management models should shift from administrative management to academic and market-oriented management. Specific measures include establishing modern school systems, achieving diversification of school governance structures, introducing

parental and social participation in school management, and improving the quality and efficiency of educational services through competition and incentive mechanisms.

Discuss the importance of diversifying curriculum structures. Diversifying curriculum structures is essential for meeting the needs of different students and promoting their comprehensive development. Schools should be encouraged to offer a variety of courses, including language, culture, arts, science, and technology, to cultivate students' innovative spirit and practical abilities. Simultaneously, it's important to bolster vocational training and promote lifelong learning to offer a wider array of educational and developmental prospects for students.

6.3 Improvement of Educational Assessment Mechanisms

Propose suggestions for improving educational assessment standards. Enhancing education evaluation criteria should prioritize students' overall growth and creativity, rather than relying solely on test results. Assessment standards should include aspects such as students' knowledge mastery, thinking abilities, practical skills, and moral character. In addition, a diversified educational assessment system should be established, including peer reviews, student evaluations, and social practice evaluations.

Discuss the establishment of error correction mechanisms for educational assessments. Error correction mechanisms for educational assessments are very important to ensure the fairness and accuracy of educational assessments. This includes establishing appeal and review systems for educational assessments, regularly reviewing and evaluating the results of educational assessments, and seriously dealing with violations in the process of educational assessments.

Emphasize the educational assessment culture centered on academic power. The educational assessment culture should be centered on academic power, emphasizing academic freedom, academic responsibility, and academic integrity. This requires establishing a fair, transparent, and academically respectful assessment environment, encouraging teachers and students to actively participate in educational assessments, and openly and fairly

discussing and feedbacking on the results of educational assessments[16].

7. Conclusion

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, this study conducts an in-depth examination of disparities within China's higher education system. The findings indicate that cultural capital is pivotal in perpetuating educational disparities. The uneven distribution of family wealth, economic resources, and cultural assets facilitates privileged class offspring's access to superior educational resources and opportunities. The education system's selection and assessment processes often acknowledge and reward students with greater cultural capital, thereby intensifying social stratification. In the context of the rapid expansion of China's higher education, although the total number of educational opportunities has increased, there is still a significant imbalance in the distribution of educational resources. The disparity between prestigious and non-prestigious universities, the concentration of educational resources in urban areas and among privileged groups, and the focus of educational assessment systems on exams all contribute to the perpetuation of social inequality to varying degrees. In addition, the transmission and accumulation of cultural capital not only affects students' academic achievement, but also affects their career development and social mobility.

To reduce inequality in higher education, a multi-faceted approach is needed. Initially, the government must enhance its educational funding, with a particular emphasis on rural and underprivileged regions, to bridge the resource disparities between various areas and institutions. Additionally, the educational framework should prioritize fairness and inclusivity by revamping selection and assessment processes and diminishing the dependence on cultural capital. Furthermore, advocating for a varied and adaptable educational approach can offer a broader range of growth opportunities for students with diverse backgrounds. Future research could further explore the transmission mechanisms of cultural capital in different stages and types of education, as well as the interaction between cultural capital and other forms of

capital (e.g., economic capital, social capital). Moreover, scholars might concentrate on studying the enduring impacts of educational disparities on social mobility and class composition, as well as exploring how educational reforms can foster greater social justice and inclusive growth.

In conclusion, through a thorough understanding of the role of cultural capital in educational inequality, we can better identify and solve these problems, promote educational equity, and achieve social harmony and progress.

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