

Challenges in Cultivating Academic Excellence: The Influence of Limited Cultural Capital on the Academic Achievement of Lower-Class Students

Yingren Deng

Abstract.

The phenomenon, “it is difficult to produce a noble son from a low-income family,” reflects the class dilemma that Chinese students from disadvantaged backgrounds are challenging in education. It is the result of their lack of cultural capital, which makes it difficult to occupy a dominant position in academic competition. As for the research on the operating mechanism of the impact of lack of cultural capital on the academic achievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, this paper is based on Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory, concerning the “theory of cultural capital at the bottom,” analyzes the realistic representation of the lack of cultural capital of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the field of education, and tries to explore the feasible strategies for students from low-income families to overcome the inferior cultural capital and realize upward mobility through education. At the micro level, students at the lower level should make full use of the existing cultural capital and school education platform. At the macro level, the state should take corresponding measures to support the education of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Keywords: Students from low-income families; Cultural capital; Academic achievement

1. Introduction

The topic of “Noble Son of a Humble Family” has always been a hot topic in public discussion. However, “it is difficult to produce a noble son from a low-income family” means that students from the bottom of society, due to poor educational resources and weak family backgrounds, find it difficult to achieve high academic achievements and then get admitted to famous universities, find decent jobs, and realize upward mobility. In 2020, Tsinghua University enrolled more than 3,500 mainland students, of whom only 20.2 percent came from rural and poor areas. According to data released by Peking University, 442 students from rural areas will be admitted to the university’s main campus in 2021, accounting for only 15.1 percent of mainland students. The low proportion of students from low-income families admitted by top universities, such as those in northern Qing, reflects the increasingly obvious phenomenon that it is difficult to find a good son from a low-income family today. This phenomenon is not only a necessary object to achieve educational equity but also a deep-seated problem related to the upward mobility of the members of the lower strata of society.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital connects cultural capital, class mobility, and education. It points out that the difference in cultural capital held by different social classes impacts student’s educational

outcomes, which is an important theoretical basis for studying the phenomenon of “low-income families are difficult to produce noble children.” From the perspective of cultural capital, based on the existing research, this paper explores how the lack of cultural capital restricts lower-class students from achieving high-level academic achievement to find feasible strategies for the lower-class students to overcome the restriction of cultural capital and realize upward mobility through education.

2. The Theoretical Viewpoint about the Lack of Cultural Capital of Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds

Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory creatively links educational achievement with social class. The term „cultural capital“ is generally used to refer to any tangible and intangible assets related to culture and cultural activities, which Bourdieu divides into three types: „physical, cultural capital“ refers to the individual’s behavior, knowledge, and skills; „Objective form cultural capital“ refers to material products with cultural connotations; „Institutional form cultural capital“ refers to the credentials that are widely recognized by the society.

In Bourdieu’s view, cultural capital tends to be exclusive to the upper middle class, whose students come from highly qualified, affluent families, typically hold more cultural capital, and are more likely to achieve high academic achievement. This perspective puts students

from low-income families at a pre-emptive disadvantage in educational competition. Still, it fails to account for the case of lower-class students who achieve high academic achievement and upward mobility. The traditional view (including Bourdieu's) firmly believes that the main reason for the high academic achievement of lower-class students is that they make up for the lack of cultural capital in their families in some way, which is the „compensatory theory“ [1]. Those at the bottom who lack cultural capital must seek help from the outside world to increase their cultural capital. The researchers who support this theory are always based on the premise that „students at the bottom have inferior cultural capital.“ Still, the cultural environment and family education of all social classes are potentially divided into higher and lower levels, ignoring efforts of individuals at the subjective level. There is a negative color of fatalism. In addition, through the investigation and analysis of primary and secondary schools and parents in specific regions, some scholars have concluded that in China, there may be no significant difference in attitudes and habits of family upbringing between the middle and upper classes and the lower classes. Class solidification is more reflected in economic capital in education [2]. Cultural capital has no obvious class separation and exclusivity, and its effect on students from low-income families may sometimes be greater than that of rich families [3].

When the theory of cultural capital was widely spread and applied in China, some scholars put forward the theory of „low-level cultural capital“ from the perspective of cultural capital theory according to China's national conditions. This theory holds that students from disadvantaged backgrounds also have unique cultural advantages and creative strength in their subjective will. The key factors that reveal the secret of the cultural capital at the bottom seem to be „preemptive power, moral thinking, and school-based mental quality“ [4]. In Chinese society, due to the influence of Confucian culture for thousands of years and the powerful historical influence of the imperial examination system, the workers at the lowest level also revere for knowledge and respect for teachers. In Chinese education, the teacher is the mentor of the students, and respect for the teacher leads to obedience to the teacher's behavior and, thus, to the ability to implement learning methods and improve grades [5].

Moreover, „reading can change destiny“ is planted in the deep cultural genes of every Chinese. This belief can often be combined with the ideals of students from disadvantaged backgrounds of the class to achieve leap-over and break out with powerful kinetic energy. The weak background of the family and the poor living environment

are two of the main „thrusts“ that urge students from disadvantaged backgrounds to study. Finally, because Chinese parents tend to expect their children to achieve higher social achievements than the older generation, they are willing to sacrifice themselves to fully support their children's studies. When this expectation is applied to students from poor backgrounds, it creates a moral obligation. Children may feel guilty and reluctant to go against their parents' expectations because their academic achievements do not match the family's educational investment. This guilt may motivate them to work hard to achieve high levels of achievement. All in all, existing studies have generally elaborated on the bottom cultural capital, emphasizing the subjective advantages of students from poor backgrounds at the individual level. The theory of bottom cultural capital aims to prove that the key to high academic achievement is utilizing bottom cultural capital rather than absorbing middle and upper cultural capital.

However, the bottom cultural capital theory is still controversial in the academic circle. The main disagreement is whether the advantages of students from disadvantaged backgrounds can be regarded as cultural capital and whether they are unique to the bottom [6]. However, both the theory of „making up“ and „cultural capital at the bottom“ admit that objective family economic conditions limit the development of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and weak educational resources can not be ignored. The unique cultural capital of the middle and upper classes will always play a huge advantage in educational competition, which is still something that students from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot have at the beginning.

3. The Lack of Cultural Capital

3.1 The Gap in Educational Resources

The gap between the rich and the poor in educational resources is a huge problem for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the stage of compulsory education, one aspect of the gap between the rich and the poor is reflected in the hardware facilities and teaching resources of schools. Schools in rich areas tend to have advanced teaching equipment and high-quality teaching resources, while schools in poor areas face the problem of aging facilities and a lack of resources. Schools in rich areas can promote intelligent teaching and frequently organize various teaching and recreational activities. However, poor areas are constrained by funding, and most schools have poor equipment, have to extend their operating hours, and cannot organize activities in the same depth and breadth as schools in rich areas.

On the other hand, there is an obvious imbalance in the allocation of teachers in urban and rural schools. There is a big gap between urban and rural teachers regarding education, quantity, and ability. Moreover, with the widening gap between urban and rural teachers regarding salary and welfare, cities will attract more excellent rural teachers. As a result, students in poor areas have obvious disadvantages in educational opportunities and learning environments compared with students in rich areas. In addition, there is also a gap between the rich and the poor in the education expenditure of different families. According to data released by the China Institute of Education Financial Sciences at Peking University, the average family education expenditure of primary school students in rural areas was 1,905 yuan in 2019, compared with 6,579 yuan in urban areas, and that of junior middle school students in rural areas was 3,821 yuan, compared with 9199 yuan in urban areas [7]. Family education expenditure is an important factor in supporting students' academic development. Urban students enjoy more education funds and are bound to come into contact with more abundant educational resources.

3.2 The Spread of the New Saying of the Uselessness of Study

Different from the statements of the uselessness of studying or learning of the last century, which questioned the value of knowledge itself, the new saying is based on the argument that the cost of education investment is increasing, the return on education investment is uncertain, and the alternative investment is increasing. It believes that the probability of upward mobility through reading is small and promotes the futility of reading [8]. Most supporters of the new saying of the uselessness of study are farmers and low-income people in urban areas, and the argument is mainly spread in rural areas [9].

The resurgence of the statements of the uselessness of studying in China's lower classes results from a combination of factors. Still, a lack of cultural capital is undoubtedly an important cause. To a certain extent, this is reflected in the disadvantages of low-income family education in three aspects: physical, cultural capital, such as language and writing; objective cultural capital, such as enlightenment reading materials, teaching materials, and after-school tutoring; and institutional, cultural capital, such as kindergarten education [10]. In many urban areas, the daily language is mostly local dialects, and the school education based on Mandarin teaching makes it difficult for these students to adapt. Low-income family conditions also prevent students from improving their academic performance through extra-curricular learning. Due to economic conditions, contempt for kindergarten

education, and many other reasons, many families let their children skip the kindergarten stage and study directly from the primary school stage, which will make the students unfamiliar with school education have a lot of learning resistance. These factors make it difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to quickly grasp the pace of school teaching, easily produce a mood of weariness, resulting in poor academic performance, and doubt of their learning ability also makes these students unknowingly believe that „reading or learning is useless.“ Poor academic performance also makes the bottom class lower their expectations for their children's education and question the possibility of upward mobility through education. Then, they treat education negatively and support the argument of the uselessness of studies [11]. The lack of cultural capital results in a vicious circle for parents and children, allowing the new saying of the uselessness of learning to spread rapidly among lower-class families.

3.3 The Poor Quality of Family Education

The family is the main place of cultural reproduction, so family education is particularly important. Research shows that parents' participation in home-school cooperation significantly affects children's development: „Of the six types of home-school cooperation, being a good parent, communicating with each other, and learning at home have a significant positive effect on children's development“ [12]. However, parents at the bottom of the family usually do not receive systematic education with high academic qualifications, lack of physical form and cultural capital. They can be said to be „willing but insufficient“ in children's education.

The effect of family education is not ideal. Most low-income families are superstitious about backward educational concepts and treat their children with wrong educational methods and attitudes, such as threatening education, buying education, laissez-faire education, and so on. The topic of „stick education“ has aroused heated discussions in society countless times, and such sentences as „filial son born under the stick“ are well known. Poor quality family education directly impacts students' psychological behavior, which can be said to be the main reason for students' weariness in learning. Under the influence of family factors, students' psychological burden is increased, learning psychological imbalance, and learning attention is distracted. Among them, building confidence in the learning process and the exertion of subjective energy in learning will be directly affected, resulting in serious psychological weakness. Setbacks in learning can easily impact self-confidence, making students afraid of learning, refusing to ask questions, and

stagnant performance. In addition, low-quality family education may also make some children's thoughts more deformed, and the growth of behavior becomes extreme, which has a great negative impact on the study and even life development.

4. Feasible Strategies for Students from Low-Income Families to Achieve upward Mobility through Education

4.1 Stimulating Their Cultural Capital

At the bottom, the theory of cultural capital points out that the cultural capital owned by low-income families is the importance parents attach to their children's education and the struggling consciousness of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, not every student from poor backgrounds can activate the cultural capital at the bottom, and it needs the joint efforts of families and students to make use of their accessible cultural capital.

First, the first step to stimulate their cultural capital requires parents to have educational beliefs. Over the past few decades, numerous cases of low-income families fully supporting their children's education have occurred. Still, the spread of the new saying of the uselessness of studies is a cause for concern. Families at the bottom need to regain confidence that education can change their lives, stick to educational expectations, and give verbal and behavioral support to their children's learning. In addition, parents also need to set an example in front of their children to create an image of progress and determination and create an optimistic family tradition to encourage their children to follow suit.

From the perspective of students, students from disadvantaged backgrounds not only passively realize the importance of learning under the guidance of their parents but also should exert their initiative, establish the goal of achieving upward mobility through education, and stimulate the lasting motivation of learning. They should use all the effective learning resources to compensate for the disadvantage of cultural capital through public education resources (schools, libraries, and various community activities).

4.2 Make Use of the Advantages of School Education

After the home, the school is the most important place for the production of cultural capital. Unlike the family, which is mainly responsible for quality education, schools pay more attention to systematic professional knowledge and skills in the content of education. Students acquire theoretical knowledge and practical skills in school. In contrast, the school recognizes the knowledge and skills students master in the form of examinations and

institutionalizes them by issuing diplomas and other ways. In Chinese schools, scores are the most important factor in the examination. Therefore, most students can obtain school recognition and further study opportunities by getting high scores, which, to a certain extent, sewn up the advantages of middle and upper-class students in physical and objective physical and cultural capital. Students only need to study hard for exams without spending a lot of energy and money on hobbies, research, or practical activities.

The interaction between teachers and students is one of the most critical links in the school learning process. In many studies on the theory of „cultural capital at the bottom,“ obedience and respect for teachers by students from disadvantaged backgrounds are considered to be the dominant factors for their high academic achievement, which is attributed to parents' trust in teachers and students' desire to be recognized by teachers. Thanks to the smooth interaction between teachers and students, students at the lower level can get the teacher's sincere guidance, which makes up for the lack of family education to a certain extent.

Due to the popularization of compulsory education and the state's support for poverty alleviation and school education in poor areas, poor students have more opportunities to go to school and come into contact with more advanced educational resources. For students from low-income families, schools are still the most important platform for absorbing cultural capital. Therefore, to achieve a high level of academic achievement, students from disadvantaged backgrounds should make the most of the advantages of school education, especially by paying attention to the interaction with teachers and actively seeking the support of teachers to get high scores in the examination and compete for the dominant position in the educational competition.

4.3 Optimize the Distribution of Educational Resources

In addition to the students from disadvantaged backgrounds actively looking for a way out at the individual subjective level, the country should also further optimize the allocation of educational resources through policy means to support the academic development of students in poor areas. For example, in June 2023, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and The General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Building a High-quality and Balanced Basic Public Education Service System, stating that developed regions should not use any means to steal excellent principals and teachers from central and western regions and Northeast regions; Accelerate the narrowing of the education gap

between regions, urban and rural areas, and groups, and the gap in the quality of inter-school education. The coverage and precision of financial aid for students from low-income families show the determination of the state to optimize the allocation of education resources [13].

First, the state needs to establish a sound education data analysis and resource evaluation system to understand the situation of each region and school as much as possible, conduct a fine assessment of the existing distribution pattern of education resources, and provide a scientific decision-making basis for the allocation of education resources.

Secondly, it is necessary to strengthen policy support and supervision. The policy to optimize the allocation of educational resources in rural areas needs corresponding financial support, aid the construction of local educational infrastructure, increase the educational funds of schools to promote the upgrading of teaching equipment and the upgrading of rural teachers' benefits, and ensure that students in poor areas can also enjoy high-quality educational resources. Use the education market distribution mechanism and attract excellent teachers, education investment, and other developed educational resources to flow to rural areas through preferential policies. At the same time, the supervision of the policy implementation should be strengthened to prevent the loss and abuse of related support funds, as well as education corruption under the policy implementation.

In addition, all parties should actively cooperate to establish a communication and exchange system between urban and rural schools, encourage urban schools to assist rural schools, and promote the exchange of experience, talent export, and student exchange so that more excellent educational resources can be shared and flowed between urban and rural areas.

5. Conclusion

The lack of superior cultural capital restricts the academic development of students from disadvantaged backgrounds through the family environment and school education, which is an important factor preventing low-income students from obtaining high-level academic achievements and realizing class mobility. Therefore, students from disadvantaged backgrounds should make the most of their family capital and take school as the platform to give full play to their advantage. The country also needs to support bottom-class students to achieve class breakthroughs at the policy level. Indeed, the impact of the lack of cultural capital is not limited to primary and secondary schools but also exists in higher education. However, students from poor backgrounds face different difficulties in

higher education. Therefore, integrating the primary and secondary school stage with the higher education stages and exploring the continuous impact of lack of cultural capital on the lower-level students in the overall education stage should be one of the emphases of future research.

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