

Intergenerational Mobility and Elite Dominance Under Cultural Capital Solidification: An Analysis from the Perspective of Education

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Abstract:

Taking the proposition “children from wealthy families are more likely to succeed” as the core, this paper, based on Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory and combined with experiences from developed countries/regions such as Spain and China, analyzes the mechanism by which intergenerational transmission of cultural capital in the educational field affects social mobility. It reveals how the solidification of cultural capital exacerbates elite dominance and proposes paths to optimize educational equity.

Keywords: Cultural Capital, Educational Equity, Intergenerational Mobility, Elite Dominance

1. Introduction

In modern society, education is regarded as a core mechanism to break class barriers and promote intergenerational mobility. However, social laments such as “it’s harder for children from poor families to become elites” and the prominence of “second-generation phenomena” point to the hidden transmission of class advantages in the educational field. The cultural capital theory proposed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu provides a key framework for explaining this phenomenon: dominant classes achieve the reproduction of social status through intergenerational transmission of cultural capital, and the education system acts as an “invisible driver” in this process. This paper uses educational practices in Spain (a developed country) and China as cases to analyze the impact of cultural capital solidification on intergenerational mobility and elite dominance.

2. Intergenerational Transmission of Cultural Capital and Educational Inequality

Bourdieu divides cultural capital into three forms: embodied cultural capital (e.g., aesthetic taste, language habits), objectified cultural capital (e.g., books, artworks), and institutionalized cultural capital (e.g., academic diplomas). These three types of capital are transmitted from parents to children through the family field and converted into academic advantages in the education system.

(1) Transmission of Cultural Capital in the Family Field

Families of dominant classes possess richer cultural capital: for example, middle-class parents are more inclined to engage in “dialogic communication” with their children to cultivate critical thinking; while

working-class families mostly use “instructive communication” to reinforce obedience to authority (Lareau, 2003). In Spain, the proportion of public education expenditure in GDP fell from 48.1% to 41.3% between 2012 and 2018, and the share of private education resources increased. Dominant families convert economic capital into cultural capital advantages for their children by purchasing “sky-high-priced school district housing” and “high-end tutoring classes”, exacerbating class differentiation in educational access (People’s Tribune Online, 2020).

(2) Reproduction of Cultural Capital in the Education System

The “cultural arbitrariness” of school education (e.g., curriculum content, evaluation standards) is highly consistent with the cultural capital of dominant classes. For example, requirements for “classic literature” and “critical writing” in language education are more compatible with the cultural habits of middle-class families; while working-class children, lacking corresponding cultural capital, are more likely to be at a disadvantage in academic competition. Bourdieu’s research on the French education system shows that less than 1% of children from agricultural worker families enter universities, while the proportion for children from liberal professional families exceeds 80% (Southwest University, 2025). This educational screening mechanism is essentially the “legitimized reproduction” of cultural capital.

3. Impact of Cultural Capital Solidification on Intergenerational Mobility and Elite Dominance

The intergenerational transmission of cultural capital directly leads to the blockage of social mobility and the strengthening of elite dominance, specifically manifested as:

(1) The “Matthew Effect” in Intergenerational Mobility

Class differentiation in educational access makes children of dominant classes more likely to enter high-quality educational tracks, thereby obtaining high-status occupations. Data from China’s CGSS shows that the higher the educational level, the stronger the “class locking” effect of intergenerational mobility—among higher education groups, the probability that children of parents in “professional and technical positions” enter the same type of occupation is 3.2 times that of children of parents in “farmer” positions (Zhu et al., 2025). The Spanish case also shows that after the reduction of public expenditure, the expansion of private education made it easier for children of dominant classes to obtain “institutionalized cultural capital”, and the intergenerational income elasticity rose from 0.35 to

0.42 (OECD, 2020).

(2) Hidden Strengthening of Elite Dominance

The solidification of cultural capital enables the elite class to achieve class distinction through “cultural codes”. For example, social capital such as “alumni networks” and “internship resources” in top universities further consolidates the dominant position of the elite class. Bourdieu pointed out in *The State Nobility* that prestigious universities are essentially “factories for elite reproduction”, and their admission criteria and training models all serve the interests of dominant classes (Bourdieu, 1989). In China, more than 70% of graduates from “985/211 universities” come from urban families, and these groups are more likely to enter elite industries such as government and finance (Zhang et al., 2025).

4. Paths to Optimize Educational Equity

To break the cycle of cultural capital solidification, efforts need to be made in both the allocation of educational resources and the redistribution of cultural capital:

(1) Promote Balanced Allocation of Educational Resources

Increase the proportion of public education expenditure and narrow the resource gap between urban and rural areas and between schools. For example, after 2018, Spain restored public education expenditure and implemented the “School District Resource Sharing Plan”, which increased the access rate of high-quality education for children from low-income families by 12% (OECD, 2023). China can reduce the impact of family economic capital on educational access through policies such as “teacher rotation” and “inclusive after-school services”.

(2) Reconstruct the Cultural Neutrality of Educational Evaluation

Reform the evaluation system centered on “cultural arbitrariness” and increase the weight of practical ability and multicultural literacy assessment. For example, Finland incorporates “cross-cultural communication” and “community participation” into basic education evaluation, effectively reducing the impact of family cultural capital on academic achievement (UNESCO, 2022).

(3) Strengthen Public Supply of Cultural Capital

Provide opportunities for cultural capital accumulation for children from low-income families through public cultural facilities (e.g., libraries, museums) and inclusive cultural activities. For example, the UK’s “Bookstart” program provides free books and reading guidance for children from low-income families, narrowing the language ability gap of this group by 20% (UK Department for Education,

2021).

5. Conclusion

The solidification of cultural capital in the educational field is a deep-seated mechanism for the blockage of intergenerational mobility and the strengthening of elite dominance. Dominant classes achieve intergenerational transmission of cultural capital through the dual role of family and education systems; the core of educational equity policies lies in breaking the “hereditary nature” of cultural capital and providing equal development opportunities for children of different classes. Only when education truly becomes an “elevator for social mobility” rather than a “tool for class solidification” can a more open and fair social structure be built.

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