



An Analysis of Educational Inequality in China Caused by Social Reproduction

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Abstract. The issue of equity in education has been a hot topic for the community in recent years. Schooling has always been seen as a catalyst for social mobility, but now it has become a tool for solidifying and reproducing class differences. This article uses social reproduction theory to explore the phenomenon of educational inequality in China. The author divides education in China into three stages: the preschool education stage, the basic education stage and the higher education stage. The inequalities in education in each stage and their causes are analyzed separately. Among them, social capital and cultural capital have the most significant influence on the reproduction of inequality. Although the expansion of education in China has greatly increased access to higher education and claimed to have achieved mass enrollment. However, this expansion of enrollment has been accompanied by high costs. The high tuition have kept the real masses (the students of workers and rural families) to accommodate on the margins or outside the circle of beneficiaries. Class status promotes its own reproduction by imposing economic constraints on educational opportunities. To achieve true equality in education, it is necessary to focus on the existing inequalities in education. The analysis in this paper helps to find the reasons behind the differences in order to create a more equal playing field for disadvantaged children.

Keywords: Social reproduction · Education · Inequality

1 Introduction

The original meaning of “reproduction” is biological, referring to sexual and biological reproduction, multiplication or regeneration, which means not only repetition, but also the possibility of change and renewal [1]. This concept was introduced to sociology study, which led to social reproduction. Social reproduction is the continuous repetition and renewal of the production process, which is both the reproduction of material goods and the reproduction of production relations. The social reproduction are divided into the reproduction of material goods and population. The reproduction of material goods is divided into four parts: production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Production, the process in which people, linked by certain production relations, use the tools of production to transform nature and create material goods suitable for people’s needs. Distribution refers to the process by which the produced products are occupied by the

members of the society in a certain form. Exchange, refers to the process of people exchanging the products of labor with each other. Consumption refers to the process of using and consuming various living materials in order to maintain their own survival and development needs. Population reproduction is the total population of a country or region, which is composed of individuals of different sexes born in different generations. As time goes by, the older generation dies and the new generation is born, resulting in the continuation of the population, which is population reproduction. Therefore, this theory is highly relevant to the functioning of society.

At the same time, social reproduction and education are inextricably linked. Social reproduction theory refers to a different framework for thinking about schooling and the reproduction of inequality [2, 3]. The theory of reproduction proposed by Bowles and Gintis (1977) argues that education is linked to the basic economic and social system of society. Through their examination of education in the United States, they found that in the capitalist system of that time, class status and the economic background of families had an impact on education, and that schools helped people of different classes to form various identities, which in turn led to the economic inequality. In their view, the school is not a place that is equal for all, nor can it serve as a tool to alleviate inequality, but rather, to some extent, is an institution of capitalist economic reproduction. The theory proposed by Bowles and Gintis only acknowledges the existence of a direct relationship between education and the economy, but without the intermediary role of culture.

Since the role of culture was not mentioned in Bowles and Gintis' account of the relationship between social reproduction and education, Bourdieu (1984) proposed the function of cultural capital in the 1970s. He believed that in contrast to economic capital, cultural capital played an important but subtle role in the status of any individual. Initially the concept of cultural capital was used only in the context of education and educational achievements [6]. Bourdieu combined "cultural capital" with "reproduction" and proposed the theory of "cultural reproduction". Bourdieu (1984) viewed that students from the middle and upper classes are well prepared for schooling before they enter the school, and everything in the school is familiar to them. Children from lower-class families, are faced with a world that is completely different from the one they have lived in, due to the limited economic and cultural capital of their families and the cultural habits they have developed in their families. While they did not use the term reproduction in their early work, they wrote that 'the legitimacy authority of the school system can multiply social inequalities' [7] and would go on to influence later work on education and reproduction [8].

Social reproduction theory is influencing Chinese education today. China is the largest developing socialist country in the world. Its administrative system is classified into five levels of nation, province (autonomous region), municipality (region/prefecture), county (urban district), and township [9]. China's education system is divided into three parts: the preschool stage, the basic education stage and the higher education stage. It follows that Chinese education can be divided into many different categories. Preschool education is a type of education in which parents and kindergarten teachers use various approaches and objects to systematically and scientifically stimulate children's brains to gradually improve the functioning of various parts of the brain. Children of this age are extremely immature and require the active guidance

of parents and teachers. It is the fundamental stage of intellectual development of life and the fastest developing period. A appropriate and correct preschool education has a huge role to play in the intelligence of young children and their future development. The basic education stage is divided into the compulsory education stage (primary education stage) and the secondary education stage. Compulsory education is the education that must be received by all children and teenagers of school age and is a public welfare undertaking that must be guaranteed by the state. According to the 1986 Compulsory Education Law of the PRC, compulsory education is administered at different levels by local authorities under the leadership of the State Council [10]. Compulsory education has the basic characteristics of compulsory, free, universal and secular. Secondary education is the education that continues on the basis of primary education. The various types of schools of secondary education are high schools, adult secondary schools, vocational high schools, adult high schools, etc. Higher education is professional and vocational education based on the completion of secondary education, and is the main social activity for the training of advanced specialists and professionals. It usually includes various educational institutions where high-level learning, teaching, research and social service are its main tasks and activities. Based on above literature, inequality in education is a universal problem that also exists in China, but there is no systematic analysis of China's educational inequality from the perspective of social reproduction. Therefore, the author will analyze the educational inequality in China caused by social reproduction in three stages: preschool education, basic education and higher education.

2 Educational Inequality in Three Stages

2.1 The Preschool Education Stage

Preschool education is an important part of education, and is the starting and foundation stage for lifelong development of individuals. With the increasing significance of preschool education to the overall healthy development of individuals and economic development of the country, preschool education has become an important element in the development of the country. With the new understanding of the public service function of modern government, in recent years, the government has put legislation on preschool education on the agenda. Therefore, preschool education is vital to human development. It is from here that educational inequality begins to arise.

2.1.1 Family Education Expectation

Education expectations play an important role in young students' need for higher education and their choice of profession. On average, the higher the income level of the family, the higher the parents' educational expectations of their children; urban families have higher educational expectations of their children than rural families; and only-child families have higher educational expectations of their children than non-one-child families [11]. These are all related to social reproduction.

Since the reform and opening up, the income gap in China has gradually widened, with the income share of the top 10% of the population rising from 27% in 1978 to 41% in 2015, while the income of the bottom 50% of the population has fallen from

27% to 15% [12]. A widening income gap in society may increase income comparisons and status seeking, and an important way to achieve status seeking is to invest in human capital such as education [13]. When income inequality widens, the rewards of education rise and parents may increase their investment in their children's human capital [14]. However, widening income inequality may also cause parents to lose incentives to invest in their children's education and children to lose motivation to pursue higher education [15].

Cultural capital, distinguished from economic and social capital, is a summation of the knowledge, technology and cultural background possessed by an individual, which facilitates the ruling class' cultural reproduction and consolidates its position. There is a strong evidence that cultural capital was transmitted from parents to their children which helps explain differential performance [16]. As a result, parents who have more cultural capital have more educational expectations for their children from their birth, hoping that they will receive more cultural capital such as education in order to inherit and consolidate the family capital.

2.1.2 Parents' Education Style

Parents with higher education level will master relatively more scientific education methods and show more understanding and support to their children's study and life. And their children tend to have good learning habits and temperament. Parents with low education level, because of the limitation of knowledge, are easily influenced by feudal traditional concepts, which leads to the low self-esteem of their children. In addition, parents with more cultural capital can take advantage of their own advantageous conditions to provide tutoring and more training in their children's studies. Enabling their children to get into learning faster in preschool education and accumulate the aesthetic sense, intellectual ability and problem awareness that are appreciated in school.

Middle-class parents tend to adopt a cultural logic of child-rearing that focuses on the "collaborative development" of their children; in contrast, working-class and poor parents tend to adopt a cultural logic of "natural upbringing" in their child-rearing [17]. This results in middle-class children having a wealth of extracurricular activities and most children maintain friendly and polite relationships with their relatives. And parents have a larger vocabulary for discussing with their children and tend to reason slowly and methodically. The students from lower class family, on the other hand, cannot afford any organized extra-curricular activities and are often scattered around the streets, with cousins being the closest playmates and relatives being the people they see the most. When it comes to everyday communication, parents only give short commands and their children often fail to understand some of the technical vocabulary [17]. This situation leads to a vicious circle of inequality.

2.2 The Basic Education Stage

The basic education stage is an important stage in a person's knowledge acquisition, and a large part of a person's educational level is determined at this stage. Because students need to study at school during this stage. The school contributes more than anything else to the reproduction of the settled order because it conceals the functions it performs

better than anything else. At the same time, it ensures social stability and endorses the ideal of social mobility through the mobility of individuals—the controlled selection of a limited number of individuals [18]. Therefore, the educational inequalities that occur in the basic education stage deserve great attention.

2.2.1 Curriculum Content

The current curriculum of national education is also designed to be more favourable to urban students, with large-scale ideological and political education permeating the various courses, pointing to life within the national system, and extensive education in natural sciences and precise language knowledge pointing to life within the urban and industrial system [19]. All this is relatively new to the children of migrant workers and their families. In urban areas there is a greater focus on integrated development. This is why the curriculum in the basic education level leaves more room for basic quality-oriented classes such as music, art, and nature exploration. Schools in better developed areas also provide students with courses such as cooking, handicraft and electricity to develop their life skills. In contrast, in rural areas, after the regular education is basically satisfied, there is a lack of teachers for quality-oriented education and a lack of investment in additional education, which makes it difficult to provide courses for further development of abilities.

In terms of language, the language employed in school textbooks is a totally external and unfamiliar symbol system for children in rural areas. These rural pupils need to leave behind the original symbolic system they have developed at home at school and thus accept alternative standard of assessment and identification. Urban children, on the other hand, are already familiar with this language from their early education and living environment. It follows that the content of schooling has a kind of cultural bias, which is expressed in the values of a kind of city life. The different levels of familiarity with the content between urban and rural students results in differences in the ease of learning which ultimately leads to differences in the chances of success in academic.

2.2.2 School Environment

In addition to inequality in curriculum content, the school environment is also an important factor in reflecting inequality in education. The author focuses on the emergence of a counter-school culture among students.

The biggest difference between urban and rural schools is that the latter are characterized by what Paul E. Willis calls a “counter-school culture” [20]. Many senior students disagreed with the authority of teachers and saw the headmaster as a money-making boss, and many dropped out of school voluntarily to work, some even becoming “street corner youths”. In their view, the knowledge imparted by the school was mostly useless and could not change their fate or situation; the school’s propaganda of “getting the children of workers to stop working” was even more nonsensical; hanging around, falling in love early and fighting were considered “cool”. Just as Willis’ idea of rural students seeking masculinity. One of the major differences between entering an urban school and a rural school was the orderliness of the former and the apparent lack of discipline in the latter.

The “counter-school culture” of rural students appears to be an individual rebellion against the school culture, but in fact it is the rural students’ obedience to their fate. As a result, they do not agree with the knowledge transmitted by schools and do not want to accept it; they are willing to work in factories and voluntarily give up the opportunity to achieve class mobility through schooling [20]. In the end, they can only replicate the fate of their parents.

2.3 The Higher Education Stage

A university education has long been seen as the gateway to upward social mobility for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and a way of reproducing social advantage for the better off [21]. There are many issues of inequality in the outcomes and experiences of graduates from different colleges and universities, all of which can affect the process of social reproduction.

2.3.1 Entrance Opportunity

The GCE is in fact a competition between the countryside and the city, where the scarce resources of the poor countryside compete with the abundant resources of the city, and the countryside inevitably has to pay a price [22]. The current system of applying in China is very cumbersome and complicated, and the slightest carelessness at the moment of deciding one’s fate may result in falling through the ranks. As a result, it is also popular among students and parents that “a good decision is better than a good grade”. This type of applying is obviously disadvantageous to the information-poor class, and there is a risk that after 12 years of hard work, students will end up with a bad application and a bad school. For the rural peasant group, their own lack of resources to access educational opportunities does not bridge the inherent resource gap between urban and rural areas, and therefore results in urban students being more likely to attend university than rural students [23].

On the contrary, those who have more cultural capital and information sources know how to use their limited points to apply for better schools. At the same time, parents who lack the cultural capital and professional knowledge let their children to make their own choices or follow the trend of choosing a popular major, making it difficult to choose a reasonable major for their children’s future development.

2.3.2 Interpersonal Communication

After enrolling in school, the differences in habits and behaviour due to their life experiences before enter university affect further communication between these students; and due to the difference cultural influences in their families and the different interests they have developed since childhood, it is difficult to have a common topic. The urban students who have more cultural capital are more outgoing and talkative and like to show off their personality, while the rural students are more introverted and shy. Compared to urban students, rural students place more emphasis on socializing with their peers. Urban students have a broader perspective and therefore like to mix with different people and expand their network of friendships, which to a certain extent also leads to the differences in employment between urban and rural students later on.

The higher education system, as a relatively independent cultural field, has unique field characteristics and rules. This field tends to adopt academic discourse and codes of conduct, favoring those individuals from the same or similar fields, such as the upper classes or groups with superior cultural capital. Individuals from the lower class need to change the characteristics and habits of their own field and try to adapt to the characteristics and rules of the higher education system in order to enter this field. Therefore, due to the homogeneity of the culture and discourse system of the higher education system, a cultural barrier naturally exists in the higher education field. The existence of this cultural barrier makes the upward mobility of disadvantaged groups entering the higher education system extremely difficult and makes it difficult to achieve substantial social mobility [24].

2.3.3 Self-development After Graduate

After completing higher education, students usually have the choice of employment or further education (including postgraduate study or study abroad), and when it comes to making choices, different cultural capital can make a difference. The multicultural capital class has a wide range of information sources, a social circle of outstanding people. There is a direct impact of social origin on occupational destination net of educational attainment even for degree-holders [25].

The parents who are highly educated themselves or even have studied abroad have more information to provide to their children, allowing them to make choices that suit their future development. Bourdieu viewed that the father's education and professional status influences the career choices of his offspring. After graduation, rural students, on the one hand because of the responsibilities of the family and on the other hand the family can hardly afford to continue to provide further education for their children. Most rural students therefore choose to take up employment. The multicultural capital class has more economic and social capital, so they can optimize their resources, whether it goes to work or abroad, without any worries. Ten years after graduation there are substantial income differences between graduates from different class origins [26]. This has become an inevitable and non-negligible problem.

3 Conclusion

From the above analysis of educational inequalities in the preschool, basic and higher education stages, it can be seen that the reproductive function of education has reinforced the original social relations and the urban-rural dichotomy of the country. This has resulted in the formation of advantaged and disadvantaged cultural circles.

However, the reproductive function of education does not mean that education is not necessary. Education has a role to play in promoting social mobility and is a legal means of movement from the lower class of society to the upper class. Since its inception as a social selection mechanism, education has provided a pathway to the upper classes of society for those who are socially disadvantaged. It avoids to some extent the inherited status of the traditional society and allows individuals to gain access to the mainstream by their own efforts. In one sense, education provides a platform for the masses to compete

on an equal level. For children of rural areas, education is the only legal way of accessing the city and to move up the social level. To deny education is to deny the opportunity for upward mobility to rural children, to block their path to equal competition, to deprive them of their birthright and to destroy their aspirations for a brighter life.

The analysis is based on the social reproduction theory, and there are some imperfections in the interpretation of Chinese education based on the theories of Western scholars. It is well known that in China, there is also a form of power capital that plays a role in the educational arena that cannot be ignored. Some of the children of high cadres can go to good primary schools and high schools, and when they grow up, they can go to top universities. The powerful could use their power capital to provide various advantages to the schools. Since power capital is not mentioned in the literature on social reproduction theory, it is not included in the discussion. But the absence of such an important form of capital in a society like China makes the argument incomplete.

At the same time, the author has not systematically proposed solutions to these educational inequalities, but has only analyzed the phenomena. As education and class are both ambitious topics, research in this area should be supported by large-scale surveys, but this article has used data collected by other scholars for other topics to serve the author's research purpose, which has somewhat affected the validity of the argument. The above-mentioned shortcomings will hopefully be remedied in future studies, so that a more comprehensive, complete and profound study of the inequalities in Chinese education caused by social reproduction can be made.

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