



How Does the Disparity in School Readiness Between Urban and Rural Pre-school Children in China Associate with Inequality? - A Bourdieuan Analysis

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Abstract. The significant gaps in education between urban and rural areas in China, which are evident before children even commence formal schooling, are regarded as the primary driver of educational inequality in China. The promotion of equal school readiness serves as a means to alleviate inequality and break the poverty cycle. This article examines the relationship between the differences and inequalities in school readiness among urban and rural pre-school children in China. Using Bourdieu's framework, the article first discusses how disparities in family background, resources, and opportunities between urban and rural areas result in unequal school readiness among pre-school children in China. It reveals that through the interaction of habitus, fields, and various forms of capital, differences in school readiness between urban and rural pre-school children in China become evident, with urban children showing significantly better school readiness. Furthermore, the article uses Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction to explain how inequality in school readiness reinforces social and cultural reproduction. It finds that the disadvantage in educational starting points affects the academic success and social mobility of rural children, leading to broader social inequality. By identifying the root causes of this inequality, the article provides valuable insights for initiatives aimed at promoting equality in education which is particularly important in China.

Keywords: School Readiness · Urban-rural inequality · Bourdieu · Social reproduction

1 Introduction

Education inequality is a significant issue in China. Yang, Huang, and Liu (2014) used a regression-based Shapley value decomposition method to understand which factors contributed the most to educational inequality in China. The results showed that the urban-rural divide had the greatest contribution to educational inequality, followed by social stratification, age, gender differences, and regional disparities, in descending order

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of importance. Moreover, the huge disparities in education between urban and rural areas in China manifest themselves before children even enter formal school. For example, a study by Gan, Meng and Xie (2016) on the differences in school readiness between rural and urban preschoolers in Zunyi, China, found that rural children scored lower than urban children in emotional and social skills and basic knowledge. Given the immense and persistent urban-rural inequalities in China, it is critical to promote equal school readiness. This is because, according to research, the early years of a child offer a special window of opportunity during which investing in young children can reduce inequalities, break the cycle of poverty, and enhance a range of long-term outcomes (Denboba, et al., 2014).

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction is a notable attempt to elucidate how social inequality is passed down from one generation to the next (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). I will use his theory as a valuable framework for understanding the inequality of school readiness between urban and rural pre-school children in China. In the context of differences in school readiness between urban and rural pre-school children in China, the theory can help to explain why children from rural areas may have less access to resources and opportunities compared to those from urban areas, and how this affects their school readiness and future success, leading to the reproduction of inequality. The purpose of this article is to identify the root causes of inequalities in school readiness between urban and rural areas, and to inform efforts to promote equality in the education of Chinese preschool children.

In this article, I will begin by introducing key concepts such as inequality and school readiness, followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework: Bourdieu's theory. Next, I will use Bourdieu's theory as a framework to explore in depth how disparities in the family background between urban and rural areas lead to unequal school readiness for preschool children in China. Then, I will examine how this inequality in school readiness reinforces cultural and social reproduction, ultimately leading to education inequality.

2 Key Concepts

2.1 Inequality

Social inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources, services, and social positions among individuals within a society (Blackburn, 2008). Social inequality can take many forms, such as racial and ethnic inequality, gender and sexual inequality, class and income inequality, political inequality, among others (Hurst, Gibbon and Nurse, 2016). Inequality exists between urban and rural areas in China. The definitions of urban and rural areas across the world vary based on different indicators such as population, geography, culture, and background characteristics (Xu and Montgomery, 2021). According to the "Regulations on the Division of Urban and Rural Statistics" issued by the State Council of China on July 12, 2008, which defines urban and rural areas as a geographical division, specifically, this regulation regards that "urban areas are cities and towns divided on the basis of municipal establishment and administrative divisions; rural areas include bazaars and villages". However, the distinction between urban and rural China is not merely geographical. Han (2009) states that there are many imbalances in China's

urban and rural development, such as backward infrastructure, inadequate social development and low levels of public services in rural areas. This is due to the fact that China had established a planned economic system to promote industrialization, divided the urban and rural areas into two parts, prioritized urban development, gradually established an extremely strict hukou registration system and restricted the movement of rural to urban areas, creating a dualistic urban-rural structure (Han, 2009).

Education inequality is the unequal access to reaching full potential, pursuing interests, and developing talents, shown by lower school performance in some children caused by uncontrollable factors such as birthplace, language, and parental occupation (Unicef, 2019). Scholars have conducted literature research on the fundamental reasons for the inequality in China's education system. For instance, Qian and Smyth (2008) used the Gini coefficient decomposition to analyze the educational disparities between rural and urban areas, as well as the coastal and inland regions of China. Their main discovery was that the primary cause of educational inequality in China lies in the differences in access to education between rural and urban areas, rather than between coastal and inland provinces.

2.2 School Readiness

School readiness is the term used to describe the collection of basic abilities, conduct, and comprehension that kids demonstrate when they start school, which helps them to excel academically during primary school, finish secondary school, and eventually prosper in their careers and personal lives (Sabol and Pianta, 2017). Currently, school readiness consists of three parts: children being prepared, schools being prepared for children, and support from families and communities that contribute to children's preparedness (High, 2008). The ecological model of school readiness proposed by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) in the United States is widely accepted, and children's readiness includes five important areas of development: physical and motor development, social-emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognitive development and general knowledge (High, 2008). Christensen et al. (2020) argue that admission to school, being a crucial life event, is linked to several outcomes such as academic and social competencies, language and literacy development, health, and social-emotional well-being, all of which are related to children's abilities at the start of formal schooling. In contrast, children who begin school with less success-related skills and qualities are at a greater risk of falling farther behind each year, which can have negative long-term consequences in areas such as educational attainment, employment, risky behaviours, mental health, and crime (Christensen et al., 2020).

3 Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's ideas offer a detailed explanation of inequality. His concepts of habitus, field, and capital can help understand the connection between objective social structures, such as institutions, discourse, ideologies, and people's daily actions and motivations (Bowman, 2010). The concept of a "field" can be seen as a social space with a set of established positions that define the structure of the social environment; within this field,

individuals' habitus - understood as an "embodied social structure" - influences their positioning and decision-making (Bourdieu, 1984). Variations in the amount and type of capital an individual possesses account for disparities in habitus (Bourdieu, 1984).

Bourdieu suggests that there are three main types of capital: economic capital, which can be easily converted into money and maybe formalized as property rights (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to three forms: embodied state, which is the individual's internalized cultural knowledge and skills; objectified state, which refers to cultural goods such as books and art; and institutionalized state, which includes academic credentials such as degrees and certificates (Bourdieu, 1986a). According to his definition, social capital encompasses the extent and caliber of social connections that can be leveraged to advance personal objectives or to transform one type of capital into another.

Despite Bourdieu's focus on the experiences of school-aged children and adults, his ideas and explanations are highly applicable to the study of the lives of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and children just starting school (Alanen, Brooker and Mayall, 2015). This is because the development of children's identities and the advantages they gain from their family and community resources, in the form of social and cultural capital, are most apparent in the earliest years of their lives, when their experiences are mainly confined to the private sphere of their home and the semi-private sphere of their childcare or preschool setting (Alanen, Brooker and Mayall, 2015).

4 Disparities in Backgrounds Between Urban and Rural Areas Lead to Unequal School Readiness for Pre-school Children

The unequal backgrounds between urban and rural areas result in a discrepancy in school readiness for pre-school children. This is because access to educational resources and opportunities is not solely determined by one's inherent talents and efforts, but also by the educational background of their family, creating an uneven playing field in the competition for educational opportunities (Fan, 2014). The school readiness of an individual child is significantly influenced by the environment in which he or she lives and grows (High, 2008). Families who possess greater resources or higher quality resources are better able to prepare their children for school (Belfield and Garcia, 2013).

Children from urban families have higher levels of economic capital, which may result in urban children having significantly better school readiness than rural children. The urban-rural income gap has fluctuated since China's reform and opening up in 1978, and the income gap between urban and rural households remains large, as evidenced by the fact that urban households have significantly higher per capita disposable income than rural households, with the urban-rural income gap ratio standing at 2.56 in 2020 (Tang et al., 2022). One of the most commonly acknowledged risk factors that contribute to a child's readiness for school is poverty, and statistics show that less than half (48%) of children from low-income families are prepared for school at the age of five, while 75% of children from moderate to high-income households are (Williams et al., 2019). Research has also shown that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds enter school with lower academic skills than their more privileged peers (but no less passion for studying), and major differences in cognitive and academic competencies

remain well into the later study (Magnuson et al., 2004). Hence, this implies that young children from rural families are significantly less prepared for school compared to their urban counterparts.

Bourdieu's focus on cultural capital is on how it is passed on and accumulated in a way that perpetuates social inequalities (Reay, 2004). He challenged the widely held belief that academic success or failure is determined by natural abilities such as intelligence and giftedness. Instead, he claimed that school success is influenced by the amount and type of cultural capital an individual inherits from their family background, rather than by individual talent or merit (Reay, 2004). This is particularly relevant to the disparity in school readiness between urban and rural pre-school children in China. The educational level of parents should be classified as institutionalized cultural capital, as mentioned in the theoretical framework section of this article, according to Bourdieu's concept.

To be more specific, urban children's parents usually possess more cultural capital than rural parents, as shown by the concentration of urban students' fathers with high school/technical secondary school education or higher and urban students' mothers with middle school or higher education, while rural students' fathers and mothers have mostly junior high school education or lower (Lu and Ming, 2015). Parents' educational background is a major factor that affects the cultural environment and family interactions in a young child's home, as seen in the fact that 45% of parents reported reading with their child every day, but this percentage decreased to 36% if the mother had not completed high school education (Williams et al., 2019). Therefore, cultural capital plays a significant role in the inequalities in school readiness between urban and rural preschool children, as demonstrated by Liu et al.'s survey on the language readiness of 1,359 preschool children in 108 kindergartens across Zhejiang, Jiangxi, and Sichuan provinces in China, which found that urban preschool children had significantly higher language readiness levels than rural preschool children in all dimensions (Liu et al., 2012).

The disparities in social capital between urban and rural China have an impact on inequalities in readiness of pre-school children for school. Rural residents have less social capital and stronger ties based on kinship and neighborliness, as opposed to weak ties based on professionalism and other heterogeneous social networks (Zhang, 2008). This difference in social capital is further exacerbated by the interdependence of different forms of capital, leading to social networks with a lack of resources and social capital among individuals with lower socio-economic status who belong to a particular group (Lin, 2000). For example, Graue's (1993) study on parents' perceptions of kindergarten readiness revealed that affluent parents have precise notions of the competencies and knowledge their children should have prior to entering kindergarten, obtained from their social circle of teachers, school administrators, and other parents. On the other hand, less affluent parents rely on their own past experiences and lack established notions of their child's readiness (Graue, 1993). These findings suggest that social capital plays a role in shaping parents' perceptions of their children's school readiness, which may lead to inequalities in school readiness between urban and rural pre-school children.

Habitus can also shed light on the potential inequalities in school readiness between urban and rural pre-school children. Habitus refers to a person's acquired preferences and

tendencies that shape their interactions with the social world, characterized as a durable and adaptable cognitive system of perception, thought, and behavior. The degree of congruence between habitus and the conditions of a particular field is a key factor in determining success within that field. If one's habitus aligns well with the expectations and standards of a field, success is more likely, whereas a lack of congruence may lead to disruption and lower levels of success (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). In the context of school readiness, the values and norms of a family's culture provide children with a clear set of expectations to follow, which are suitable within the household (Mashburn and Pianta, 2006). However, if these values and norms do not align with the ones the child experiences when starting school, the child may be deemed to have behavioral issues and may not be prepared for school (Mashburn and Pianta, 2006). Research shows that rural parents place less emphasis on school readiness compared to urban parents. Many rural parents in China believe that formal learning in primary school is when children are first affected academically, and many only recognize the usefulness of cognitive readiness, which is inconsistent with the idea of comprehensive preparation required for school readiness (Comparative Study of School Readiness of Children in Urban and Rural Areas Project Group, 2008). Therefore, influenced by habitus, there exist inequalities in school readiness between urban and rural areas in China.

5 The Disparities in School Readiness Between Urban and Rural Pre-school Children Lead to Inequality

According to Bourdieu (2003), the education system plays a central role in perpetuating socioeconomic inequality by legitimizing the current social hierarchy and making it seem like a hierarchy of merit or abilities. Similarly, Bourdieu primarily focuses on how individuals acquire benefits (capital) from their earliest family relationships, which are legitimized by the educational system and ultimately lead to knowledge and power.

As analyzed in the preceding text, rural preschool children are not as well-prepared for school as their urban counterparts. Additionally, children who enter school behind their peers, particularly on multiple dimensions of school preparation, struggle to meet the expectations of formal education, and as much as fifty percent of school failure may be attributed to preschool learning and development deficits (Ting, 2007). As a result, it is difficult for rural children to achieve academic success in this situation. However, increasing their cultural capital and achieving academic success, such as attending university, through their own efforts and the help of others is an effective way for rural children to break away from rural areas and enter urban life (Yu, 2006). The failure in the school of rural children also means that rural children must remain in the countryside, while urban children are less likely to migrate to the countryside, because of the superiority of their hukou, whether they succeed or fail in their studies.

Drawing from Yu's (2006) analysis of the urban-rural gap in China, I made revisions by incorporating academic preparation into two relatively closed circles: the urban circle and the rural circle. The solid line represents the cycle of cultural reproduction, while the dashed line represents the discontinuity of the cycle. It can be observed that rural children who are not adequately prepared for school face difficulty in achieving good academic performance, ultimately struggling to break free from the constraints of the rural circle

(Yu, 2006). This can be understood as the disadvantage in educational starting points affecting the academic success of rural children, which in turn affects social mobility. This means that most rural children will continue to work in lower-level occupations and occupy lower social status, just like their parents. Thus, the process of cultural reproduction to social reproduction as mentioned by Bourdieu is completed, which ultimately leads to inequality.

In China, the nationwide unified college entrance examination system seems to eliminate the influence of family background and relies solely on scores for selecting students for higher education, but it actually contains hidden inequality against rural students (Wang, 2016). In this Chinese competitive mobility system, children from urban families are more likely to achieve academic success in their future studies, while children from rural families are inevitably disadvantaged by the lack of an equal learning environment in academic competition in front of China's one-size-fits-all system of secondary and higher education examinations, thus reproducing the pattern of urban-rural stratification in educational attainment and perpetuating the existing inequality between urban and rural areas.

6 Conclusion

In summary, this article highlights the significant disparity in school readiness between urban and rural pre-school children in China and how these differences are associated with inequality. Drawing upon Bourdieu's theory, the article demonstrates that the unequal distribution of resources and practices between urban and rural areas provides urban children with a clear advantage in school readiness.

The article emphasizes the importance of addressing the issue of inequality in school readiness between urban and rural areas in China. It is important to recognize that differences in family background between urban and rural areas inevitably affect the opportunities for children to access education resources. The interaction of habitus, fields, and various forms of capital reveals potential inequalities in school readiness between urban and rural pre-school children in China, resulting in significantly better school readiness among urban children. Furthermore, the inequality in school readiness between urban and rural areas in China leads to broader social inequality, as rural children are not adequately prepared for school, hindering their academic success and social mobility. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction suggests that the education system plays a central role in perpetuating socioeconomic inequality, legitimizing the current system of social hierarchy. Therefore, this article emphasizes the importance of recognizing the relationship between school readiness and inequality and calls for collaborative efforts to address the issue of inequality in school readiness, education, and broader social inequality between urban and rural areas in China.

This article demonstrates how Bourdieu's framework can contribute to understanding the issue of school readiness in urban and rural areas of China. By acknowledging the social inequalities hidden underneath school readiness, it allows us to lead it allows us to engage more realistically with the challenge of changing practices to reduce urban-rural educational disparities and promote equality in education. It is hoped that this article's insights will contribute to a better understanding of the challenges facing pre-school

education in China and help effectively bridge the gap in school readiness between urban and rural pre-school children, promoting policies that provide equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their background or location.

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