

The Role of Social Reproduction Theory in Understanding the Issue of Inequality in the United States Education System

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Abstract: This article explores the applicability of Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) in comprehending the pervasive issue of inequality within the United States education system. SRT offers a critical lens to analyze how educational disparities are not merely coincidental but deeply rooted in societal structures and power dynamics. By delving into the historical context, structural components, and contemporary manifestations of educational inequality, this article demonstrates the relevance of SRT in elucidating the mechanisms that perpetuate unequal access to quality education. Furthermore, it underscores the imperative of addressing these disparities to promote a more equitable and just society. This article highlighted that the school system is designed in a way that encourages aristocratic structures that suit upper-class and middle-class children, leaving children behind. This has constituted inequality in the educational system. Addressing these disparities is not only imperative in education but also a crucial step toward building a more equitable and just society.

Keywords: Social reproduction theory, Inequality, Education equality.

1. Introduction

The United States has long grappled with significant disparities in its education system. These disparities manifest along racial, socioeconomic, and geographic lines, resulting in uneven access to educational resources and opportunities (Broer et al., 2019; Dill & Zambrana). Understanding the root causes of these disparities and addressing them effectively requires a comprehensive theoretical framework. One such framework that has been used as a lens to view inequality is SRT (Bourdieu, 1986). This theory offers valuable insights into the perpetuation of inequality within the education system by examining how societal structures and power dynamics reproduce and reinforce existing disparities. In this article, we explore the role of social reproduction theory in illuminating the issue of inequality in the United States education system.

2. Literature Review

Social Reproduction Theory stems from Marxist socioeconomic theories, expanding the idea to cultural and social phenomena, encapsulating how inequalities are transmitted from one generation to another. In the US education system context, scholars have applied SRT to explain the persistent disparities in educational attainment and opportunities among different socioeconomic and ethnic groups (Backer & Cairns, 2021; Munro, 2019). The foundational work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in the late 1970s serves as a bedrock for understanding SRT. Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus have been instrumental in explaining how economic and cultural resources are transmitted in families, ultimately shaping educational outcomes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

To comprehend the contemporary educational inequalities in the United States, it is crucial to consider their historical origins. SRT traces these origins to historical practices such as segregation, redlining, and unequal funding, which systematically disadvantaged marginalized communities (Bourdieu, 1986; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Contemporary scholars have approached SRT from an intersectional lens, incorporating factors like race, gender, and class in the analysis (Leonardo, 2009; Mezzadri, 2021; Winders & Smith, 2019). This approach has been critical in the United States, where racial educational disparities have been prominent. These historical injustices have impacted the present education landscape, perpetuating disparities in access to quality schools and resources. SRT identifies several key structural components that contribute to educational inequality. Lipman's analysis of urban education and neoliberal policies emphasizes the role of macro-structural factors and governmental policies in reproducing inequalities. Through a detailed analysis of Chicago's urban education policy, Lipman presents a broader view of how SRT operates in the modern context (Lipman, 2011).

Recent empirical studies, like those conducted by Reardon, have provided quantitative backing to SRT (Reardon, 2011). These studies have consistently shown a widening gap in educational achievements among different socioeconomic groups in the US, supporting the claims made by SRT about the perpetuation of inequalities. Funding for public schools in the United States is primarily derived from local property taxes, resulting in significant disparities between affluent and impoverished neighborhoods. This funding model perpetuates resource inequalities, as schools in affluent areas have access to more advanced facilities, well-paid teachers, and extracurricular programs. Despite legal efforts to desegregate schools, de facto segregation

remains a reality in many regions (Peterson et al., 2020). This segregation exacerbates inequality as racially and economically isolated schools often lack the resources and opportunities necessary for student success.

In their seminal work "Schooling in Capitalist America", Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis argued that education in the United States functions to reproduce existing class structures (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). They suggest that the hidden school curriculum - the unspoken norms, values, and expectations that govern the behaviors and attitudes of students and teachers - maintains social hierarchies. Similarly, Intersectional approaches, notably advocated by scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw, extend SRT by considering how various forms of social inequality interact and are reproduced through interconnected systems of power and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Similarly, Collins' critique of the early SRT proposed the educational credentialism theory, arguing that education serves as a means of social selection rather than a transmitter of social inequalities. While critiquing the SRT complements it by adding depth to understanding the functioning of inequalities in education (Collins, 1979).

3. Theoretical Framework

Social Reproduction Theory is a theoretical perspective in sociology and education that focuses on how social inequalities are reproduced or perpetuated through education and other societal institutions (Bourdieu, 1974; Bourdieu, 1986). The theory emphasizes that social inequalities are sustained through economic systems and social and cultural practices, institutions, and discourses. It primarily derives from Marxist theory and has been further developed and nuanced by several scholars and through various critical lenses such as feminism, critical race theory, and more (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Few-Demo, 2014; Laing, 2019). Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of capital to understand and analyze social inequality and societal power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1974; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

3.1 Forms of Capital

Bourdieu's concept of capital is essential for understanding how social inequalities are reproduced through education. He argued that capital is not just limited to financial assets but encompasses various forms of resources that individuals and groups possess, which can be used to gain advantage and social status. Bourdieu's theory of capital is a central component of his broader sociological framework. He identified several key forms of capital, including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital.

3.1.1 Economic Capital

Economic capital entails traditional financial resources, such as money, property, and assets (Gilleard, 2020). It plays a significant role in determining an individual's access to material goods and services. Those with more economic capital have greater financial resources and often enjoy higher social status and privileges. Children from middle-class backgrounds have better educational opportunities compared to children from low-income families. This is because their families have enough money to invest in them to get the best educational experience. Most private schools have better educational standards than public schools, but lower-class families cannot afford to pay for their children's expensive education in these private schools. Financial capital has impacts on the students, both objectively and subjectively (Doob, 2013). For example, a wealthy middle-class parent may have all the needed financial requirements to meet their desire for the best educational experience for their child. Still, the child may lack the self-confidence or intellectual capacity to perform excellently in school. On the other hand, a child from a low-income family may not have all the parental support financially but have the intellectual capacity to perform well in school. This means that the child from a wealthy background has the objective advantage, while the other has the subjective advantage.

3.1.2 Cultural Capital

Cultural capital encompasses knowledge, skills, education, and cultural experiences (Doop, 2013; Gilleard, 2020). In the school system, a family's cultural capital influences their children's performance in school. The parents use their knowledge and experience to get the desired result for their children. For example, Weininger and Lareau (2007) reported in a study of eighty-eight working-class and middle-class children that "middle-class parents were more inclined than their counterparts to reason with their children, not simply to give them orders, but to encourage them to engage in thoughtful conversations. As a result, the middle-class students obtained more effective early development of skills that helped them relate to teachers and peers in school" (cited in Doob, 2013, p.14). Cultural capital can be further divided into three subcategories:

Embodied Cultural Capital: Individuals internalize this form of cultural capital through socialization and education. It includes language proficiency, manners, tastes, and cultural competencies. Those with a wealth of embodied cultural capital are often better equipped to navigate social situations and institutions.

Objectified Cultural Capital: Objectified cultural capital refers to tangible cultural goods, such as books, artwork, musical instruments, and educational certificates. Owning these items can enhance an individual's social standing and cultural credentials.

Institutionalized Cultural Capital: This form of cultural capital is associated with educational qualifications, degrees, and credentials. Institutions like schools and universities confer this type of cultural capital, opening doors to better opportunities and higher social status.

3.1.3 Social Capital

Social capital entails an individual's social relationships and connections, including family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances (Gilleard, 2020). It is not just about the quantity of connections but also the quality of those connections and the resources they can provide, such as information, support, and access to opportunities. Strong social capital can increase social mobility and advantages in various aspects of life.

3.1.4 Symbolic Capital

Symbolic capital represents the recognition, prestige, and honor an individual or group receives from society (Gilleard, 2020). It is often tied to achievements and reputation in specific fields, such as academia, art, or sports. Symbolic capital can translate into social influence and the ability to shape cultural norms and values.

4. Discussion

SRT provides a framework for investigating the gap between the different socioeconomic classes in society. That is the difference between the upper, middle, and lower/working classes (Weiss, 2021). As seen in the literature, social reproduction allows the transmission of social inequality from one generation to another (Leonardo, 2009; Mezzadri, 2021; Winders & Smith, 2019). That is, parents from one generation transfer their wealth to the offspring of the next generation. This suggests that a child from a good socioeconomic background is likely to get the best education. While a child from a poor socioeconomic background is expected not to have the best education. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that the differential between public and private schools reproduces social inequality in the educational system. The Marxist argued that the education system prepares students for future occupational and economic positions based on their socioeconomic class (Kvasny, 2009). Bourdieu maintained that "the function of the education system is to certify cultural advantages- that is, cultural capital already possessed by the children of advantaged classes" Robinson and Garenier (1985, p.253).

Furthermore, the contemporary manifestations of SRT allow us to understand how these structural components continue to operate today. The school-to-prison pipeline: The over-policing of schools and harsh disciplinary practices disproportionately affect students of color, pushing them into the criminal justice system and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Access to AP courses remains unequal, as students from affluent backgrounds are more likely to have access to these advanced opportunities, giving them a competitive edge in college admissions. Again, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide, with students lacking access to technology and high-speed internet disproportionately affected by the shift to remote learning. The practice of tracking students into different ability groups can limit opportunities for advancement, disproportionately affecting students from marginalized backgrounds. Additionally, variations in curriculum quality between schools can reinforce disparities in educational outcomes. Similarly, standardized tests, often used for admissions and funding decisions, have been criticized for perpetuating inequality due to their inherent biases and limited ability to assess a student's full potential.

4.1 The School System Promoting Educational Inequality.

Over time and even in recent times, sociologists have described the school system as a place where children from all sorts of backgrounds can meet, irrespective of their background, and get an equal educational experience that will prepare them for future occupational opportunities. Notwithstanding, is this the case in various educational systems around the world? Van Zanten (2005) stated in the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) that school inequalities are one of the regular reports in the Sociology of Education research. Despite all the efforts by researchers and government policies to bridge the gap between the privileged and the less privileged, studies still prove an increasing difference between elite and working-class children in society (VanZanten, 2005). Bourdieu presented the theory of social reproduction to illustrate that social inequality is produced by the education system (Van Zanten, 2005).

Today, inequality seems to be a common feature in most educational systems around the world. There appears to be a wide gap between upper, middle, and working-class children to get equal educational opportunities (Broer et al., 2019.). Similarly, Bourdieu's (1974, p.33) studies on school as a conservative force reported that the school system is designed in a way that provides a structure for social inequalities. He stated

that the son of a manager is eight times as likely to get to university compared to the son of an agricultural worker, forty times as likely as the son of a factory worker, and twice as likely as the son of a man employed in a low salaried staff grade (Bourdieu's (1974). This means that the school promotes social inequality in society. Likewise, Baker (2021) argued that the school administration designed the school so that the fees, code of conduct, entry criteria, and other rules and regulations favor middle-class children. This determines the class of children that attend such schools. Similarly, Triventi et al. (2016) argued that education encourages class reproduction in society. Moreover, Bourdieu claimed that the "educational system is one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a social gift treated as a natural one." (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 32).

Furthermore, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) stated that lower-class students are more likely to drop out of school than their middle-class counterparts. He noted that "previous performances being equal, pupils of working-class origin are more apt to eliminate themselves from secondary education by declining to enter it than to eliminate themselves once they have entered, and a fortiori more likely not to enter than to be eliminated from it by the explicit sanction of examination failure" (1990, p.153). This simply supports the claim that the school system is designed in a manner that fosters inequality in the education system. The middle-class child finds it quite easy to fit into the system compared to the lower-class counterpart. Therefore, there is a need for the education system to recognize this difference between each social class in pedagogic delivery.

4.2 Parents as Perpetrators of Inequality in the School System

Several studies have identified parents as one of the perpetrators of social reproduction in education (Campbell, 2012; Harker, 1984; Hogan, (2017). A family's cultural capital influences a child's attainment in school. Children from a better socioeconomic background tend to do better than children from a lower income background (Tzanakis, 2011). Irwin's (2009) study on parental influence on students' attainment reported that children from the elite class have better academic performance than those from a low-income background. This depicts that Children exposed to a middle-class upbringing tend to do better in school because of their parent's cultural capital.

Also, Schoon et al. (2002) noted that a father's wealth transferred from one generation to the following guarantees a bright future for their children. They pointed out that various factors, including lack of material resources, poor living conditions, and educational background, cause socioeconomic disadvantage. They indicated that these factors influence the development of the child. This outcome tends to affect the child's educational performance and attainment. However, Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) maintained that the difference in performance by various social classes of children is a combination of the child's intellectual capacity and parental background. This implies that inequality is not only associated with parental background, as Schoon and Persons pointed out. This suggests that a child from a low socioeconomic background but with high intellectual capacity can do well academically. Also, a child with a good socioeconomic background but with low academic abilities can also perform poorly.

Furthermore, Sullivan (2002) has argued that family cultural capital influences the child's development. The cultural influence should be constant to affect the child's performance. Therefore, Bourdieu's framework of social reproduction makes us believe that social class influences a child's educational performance. This effect is based on the combination of the child's intellectual capacity and parental endowment. Therefore, there is a need for a strong link between these two factors for such a relationship to exist. However, the author did not adequately present any connection between cultural capital and educational attainment. Sometimes, a father's social capital does not influence the child's achievements in school. Moreover, Dunais (2006) argued that the author failed to justify any link between a child's social capital and academic results. For example, Irwin's (2009) studies carried out in the UK reported that "educational expectations in 13-year-old young people in England were more associated with young people's perceptions of parental emotional support, a measure of parental social capital rather than cultural capital" (cited in Tzanakis, 2011, p.78).

Andersen and Jæger (2015) argued that combining parental capital and the student's intellectual capacity may not guarantee good academic performance. Thus, a student from a poor socioeconomic background but with good intellectual capacity can do well in school. Also, a middle-class child with low intellectual capacity may not do well in school. Thus, they stated that ability and effort are significant mechanisms through which family socioeconomic status is transformed into educational achievement. Reproduction occurs mainly through the differential ability and effort of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Andersen & Jæger, 2015).

5. Implications for Policy and Practice

Recognizing the role of SRT in understanding educational inequality has significant policy and practice implications (Ball, 2012; Ikpuri, 2018). Scholars like Michael Apple and Stephen Ball have explored how policies and institutions (including schools) play a role in the reproduction of social inequalities, often serving the interests of dominant groups in society and reinforcing neoliberal ideologies (Apple, 2013; Ball, 2012). Good policies are needed to ensure more equitable funding distribution for schools, reducing the reliance on property taxes and addressing resource disparities. Ikpuri (2018) noted that governments need to roll out good policies to enhance quality education for their citizens. Effective policy implementation strategies should be adopted that fight against anti-bias education programs that can help reduce the impact of discrimination and prejudice within schools. Policymakers should reevaluate the use of standardized testing in admissions and funding decisions, considering alternative measures of student achievement. Similarly, continued efforts to desegregate schools and promote diverse learning environments are essential to combating inequality.

Education policy in the United States should be designed to break the cycle of social inequality and not inadvertently reinforce it. This can be achieved by addressing funding disparities, diversifying the curriculum, promoting equity in access to education, and taking a more holistic approach to education policy that considers the broader social and economic context in which education occurs. Policies aimed at reducing income and wealth gaps can help break the social reproduction cycle, encouraging a curriculum that breaks away from Eurocentric viewpoints and incorporates diverse perspectives and histories. Incorporating SRT into policy and practice requires a holistic understanding of how various social institutions and structures intersect and contribute to inequality. It also necessitates a commitment to addressing these inequalities through systemic changes that prioritize the well-being and equal opportunity of all members of society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article discussed the case of inequality in the United States education system using the theory of social reproduction as a lens. It presented the theory of social reproduction as a basis for understanding and describing the challenges of inequality in the educational system. SRT provided a valuable lens through which we understand the profoundly entrenched issue of inequality in the United States education system. By examining the historical context, structural components, and contemporary manifestations of educational disparities, this theory highlights the need for comprehensive reforms to dismantle the mechanisms that perpetuate inequality. In the first instance, it identified inequality as a social problem in various educational systems around the world. Evidence highlights that this problem of inequality has been lingering since the 1950s. Despite efforts being made by researchers and government policies to challenge this issue, educational inequality continues to remain a political priority. This article introduced the concept of social reproduction and the four kinds of capital illustrated by Bourdieu. These concepts were defined and applied in analyzing the problem of inequality in the education system. These concepts were used to examine the gap between working-class and middle-class children in schools and the available opportunities based on their socioeconomic class.

This article highlighted that parents and the educational system are perpetrators of inequalities within the education system. The school system is designed in a way that encourages aristocratic structures that suit upper-class and middle-class children, leaving children behind. This has constituted inequality in the educational system. On the other hand, resourceful parents use their capital to ensure their children get the best education to maximize the best job placements after school. The lower-class families may be unable to offer this to their children because of limited capital. In addition to this, limited capital is correlated with low aspirations. The article recorded that in recent times, schools, colleges, and universities are trying to bridge the social inequalities gap in the education system. This is seen in the financial support granted to less privileged gifted students to get an equal educational opportunity as the child from a privileged socioeconomic background. Addressing these disparities is not only imperative in education but also a crucial step toward building a more equitable and just society.

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