

Research on the Differentiation Mechanism of Family Background and Educational Opportunities for Rural Students in China

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Abstract. Educational equity is an important goal in modern society. However, under China's urban-rural dual structure, rural students still face shortages of educational resources and institutional barriers. This study focuses on rural students and explores how family background contributes to educational inequality. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and educational reproduction, as well as Coleman's theory of social capital, and integrating relevant literature and case studies, this research examines how cultural capital, social capital, economic capital, and psychological capital embedded in family background shape educational opportunities. The findings indicate that cultural capital plays a central role in improving students' academic performance and helping them adapt to school culture, while social and economic capital provide supportive functions in terms of information access and educational investment. Psychological capital indirectly influences educational outcomes by shaping students' academic beliefs. Overall, differences in multiple dimensions of family capital, when combined with institutional barriers, intensify educational inequality for rural students.

Keywords: Educational equity, Cultural capital, Social capital, Rural students, Educational opportunities

1. Introduction

Educational equity is one of the key goals of modern public policy and an important indicator of both the quality of social development and the level of protection of citizens' basic rights. In China, although the state has implemented a series of policies over the past two decades, such as "balanced development of compulsory education" and the "rural revitalization strategy," narrowing the urban-rural education gap in terms of infrastructure and enrollment rates, significant disparities remain in educational opportunities, educational quality, and subsequent educational development [1]. In particular, in rural areas, the long-standing problems of scarce high-quality educational resources, high teacher turnover, and limited pathways to higher education pose structural challenges to achieving educational equity [2]. Against this backdrop, family background, as a crucial micro-level factor influencing students' educational trajectories and life perspectives, has increasingly attracted

scholarly attention over time. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and educational reproduction points out that families, through the accumulation and transmission of cultural, social, and economic capital, profoundly shape children's academic performance and educational mobility. Research at home and abroad has shown that cultural capital often plays a more important role than economic and social capital in explaining differences in educational attainment [3]. In rural families especially, the lack of cultural capital not only affects academic performance but also undermines students' ability to adapt to school culture and to access educational opportunities. Educational equity is one of the core issues in the sociology of education and education policy research, encompassing the safeguarding of educational rights, the equal distribution of educational resources, equal opportunities, and reasonable outcomes [4]. Therefore, this study focuses on rural students in China, drawing on the theories of cultural capital and educational reproduction to explore the mechanisms through which different forms of family background capital affect educational opportunity. Specifically, it addresses two core questions: (1) Through what pathways does family background influence rural students' educational opportunities? (2) How do different forms of capital, particularly cultural capital, shape students' academic performance and educational mobility? By integrating a literature review and case analysis, this research aims to reveal the underlying connections between family background and unequal educational opportunities, while also providing empirical evidence to inform the development of differentiated educational support policies.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

Within the context of China's dual urban-rural structure, rural areas have long been at a disadvantage in accessing high-quality educational resources [2]. French sociologist Bourdieu proposed the theory of cultural capital, which categorizes cultural capital into three forms—institutionalized, objectified, and embodied—and emphasizes its role in the intergenerational transmission of educational opportunities. Studies have shown that cultural capital often holds greater importance than economic capital and social capital in explaining differences in educational attainment [3]. In rural families in particular, the lack of cultural capital restricts students' ability to adapt to school culture, improve academic performance, and access educational opportunities.

Family background influences educational opportunities through multiple dimensions, including economic capital (the capacity for educational investment), social capital (networks of information and relationships), and psychological capital (educational expectations and self-efficacy). Under conditions of institutional barriers and unequal distribution of resources, the effects of these forms of capital are further amplified.

3. Educational dilemmas of rural students in China

3.1. Urban-rural disparities in the distribution of educational resources

For a long time, educational resources in China have been unevenly distributed in both quantity and quality between urban and rural areas. These disparities are not only reflected in school facilities and teacher allocation but also extend to curriculum offerings, teaching methods, and extracurricular resources [2]. High-quality educational resources are concentrated mainly in economically developed regions and key urban schools, whereas rural schools often lack well-qualified teachers, advanced teaching equipment, and diverse curricula. Although state funding for rural areas has steadily increased, investment in “soft” aspects such as teacher training, curriculum development,

and school culture building remains insufficient. This imbalance places rural students at a disadvantage in terms of knowledge, skills, and overall competency development, directly undermining their competitiveness in the race for higher education [4].

3.2. Institutional barriers in the pathways to higher education

First, the household registration (hukou) system restricts rural students' access to high-quality urban schools, particularly evident in school-district-based enrollment policies at the compulsory education stage [1]. Second, although the high school and college entrance examination systems are uniform in form, rural students are at a clear disadvantage in exam preparation, resource access, and information acquisition [5]. Moreover, policies often concentrate quality resources in “demonstration schools,” which are usually located in cities or county seats. The entry thresholds for these schools remain high for rural students, creating an overlap of “institutional barriers” and “resource concentration effects.” As a result, even rural students who meet the academic requirements for such schools may be excluded due to geographic, economic, or family-related constraints. These issues highlight how both resource imbalances and institutional obstacles significantly affect rural students' educational opportunities.

3.3. Gaps in family economic capacity and educational investment

Family economic capital is a key factor shaping the capacity for educational investment. Studies indicate that families with stronger financial resources are better positioned to provide their children with additional educational support, such as private tutoring, learning materials, and extracurricular enrichment activities [6]. By contrast, many rural families, constrained by limited income, have only minimal disposable funds for education. This not only affects students' study conditions but also indirectly lowers their educational aspirations and motivation. In the context of urban–rural educational competition, insufficient economic capital makes it more difficult for rural students to sustain systematic learning support, thereby widening educational opportunity gaps.

To reduce inequality and curb educational “involution,” China implemented the “Double Reduction Policy” in 2021. The policy required all for-profit academic tutoring institutions serving compulsory education students to be registered as non-profit organizations, introduced a licensing system for online institutions, and banned these institutions from “going public” or engaging in capitalized operations. It also prohibited tutoring during public holidays, weekends, and school vacations, while imposing strict limits on course duration and scheduling [7]. The policy aimed not only to prevent the commodification of education but also to promote equity. By curbing the advantage that high-income families gained through expensive tutoring, the policy alleviated disparities between urban and rural, as well as across social classes, while also reducing student burdens and redirecting educational resources back into the public school system.

3.4. Lack of family educational support and the “hidden curriculum”

Deficiencies in cultural capital are particularly evident in rural families. On the one hand, many rural parents have relatively low educational attainment, limited familiarity with school curricula and educational systems, and therefore struggle to provide effective academic guidance [3]. On the other hand, rural households often lack a strong reading culture, a stimulating learning environment, and access to extracurricular cultural activities. As a result, students are rarely exposed to the “hidden curriculum” recognized by schools, such as academic language proficiency, classroom participation

strategies, and inquiry-based learning skills. These competencies cannot be acquired through short-term training but instead rely on long-term immersion in a culturally supportive environment. Without these competencies, rural students not only underperform academically but may also find themselves at a disadvantage in interactions with teachers and peers, further reducing their chances of gaining educational opportunities.

4. Specific mechanisms of how family background shapes educational opportunities

Family background influences the educational opportunities of rural students not through a single dimension but rather through the combined effects of cultural, social, economic, and psychological capital. These forms of capital can directly affect students' academic performance or indirectly shape their educational chances through institutional settings, the distribution of educational resources, and the dynamics of social networks.

4.1. Transmission and application of cultural capital: family adaptation to school culture

Bourdieu's theory emphasizes that education within schools is deeply affected by differences in individuals' cultural capital and habitus. Variations in cultural capital are reflected in the resources and environments provided by families from an early age, such as parents' educational attainment, household reading practices, language proficiency, and exposure to art and knowledge. These factors influence children's adaptability and performance in the classroom. Habitus, shaped through long-term socialization, manifests in modes of thinking, behavioral patterns, and value orientations, which shape how students interpret knowledge, respond to teachers' expectations, and plan their academic paths.

In the Chinese rural context, the lack of cultural capital is evident in limited parental education, insufficient understanding of school culture and academic norms, and a mismatch between home educational practices and the pedagogical expectations of schools [3]. Consequently, rural students often lack alignment with school culture in areas such as language expression, prior knowledge, and learning strategies, putting them at a disadvantage in classroom participation, exam performance, and teacher–student interactions. Empirical studies based on CGSS data further demonstrate that children's participation in highbrow cultural activities (e.g., reading, visiting exhibitions) significantly improves educational attainment and academic outcomes, with the effect being especially pronounced in rural areas [5].

4.2. Social capital and information access: school choice, advancement, and policy benefits

Coleman's theory of social capital highlights the role of social networks and trust in promoting educational achievement. In rural areas, the scarcity of social capital is particularly evident in limited access to educational information, low frequency of interaction between parents and educational institutions, and the absence of high-quality social networks. Compared with urban families, rural families often struggle to obtain timely and accurate information on school selection, admission policies, and scholarship opportunities, which results in missed educational chances [6].

Moreover, social capital manifests in the quality of community support and peer networks. Research indicates that families with strong social capital can leverage kinship networks, alumni connections, and other broader social networks to secure better school placements and extracurricular opportunities for their children. Such pathways, however, are far less available to rural families, further constraining their children's educational mobility.

4.3. Economic capital and the direct purchasing power of educational resources

Economic capital represents the most visible channel through which family background shapes educational opportunities. Its role primarily lies in enabling families to purchase educational resources and improve learning environments. Urban families often allocate economic capital toward private tutoring, enrichment programs, housing in desirable school districts, and educational technologies. Rural families, however, are constrained by lower income levels; even when willing to invest more in education, the scale of their investment remains limited.

This economic gap not only directly diminishes rural students' access to supplemental learning resources outside of school but also indirectly undermines their confidence and competitiveness in the educational process [5].

4.4. Psychological capital and expectation management: how family educational beliefs shape students' self-identity

Although psychological capital was not explicitly included in Bourdieu's typology of capital, recent research in the sociology of education has recognized it as an important supplementary dimension in how family background influences students' educational opportunities. Psychological capital encompasses hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy. In rural families, it is common for parents to hold relatively low educational expectations and to lack long-term planning for their children's academic trajectories. This diminishes rural students' academic motivation and weakens their sense of academic self-identity. By contrast, students with higher levels of psychological capital are better equipped to maintain a positive mindset in the face of challenges such as scarce resources and intense exam pressures, and they can sustain learning engagement through self-regulation [8]. This suggests that psychological capital is not only an essential inner force for coping with educational inequality but also closely linked to the cultural atmosphere and educational beliefs fostered within the family.

In summary, cultural capital occupies a central position in shaping the mechanism through which family background affects educational opportunity. Social and economic capital serve as complementary forces, providing access to resources and pathways to opportunity, while psychological capital indirectly influences educational outcomes by shaping students' academic beliefs and self-identity. These differences in capital are particularly pronounced between urban and rural contexts as well as among families of varying backgrounds, and they are further amplified by institutional barriers and structural inequalities in resource distribution.

5. Conclusion

This study takes rural students in China as the research object and, in combination with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and educational reproduction and Coleman's theory of social capital, systematically explores the mechanism through which different types of capital embedded in family backgrounds influence rural students' educational opportunities. The research centers on two core issues: (1) Through what channels does family background influence the educational opportunities of rural students? (2) How do different forms of capital, especially cultural capital, affect students' academic performance and educational mobility? Research has found that family background, through the combined effect of cultural capital, social capital, economic capital and psychological capital, profoundly influences the development trajectory of rural students in the education system. Among these forms of capital, cultural capital plays a core role in improving rural students'

academic performance, helping them adapt to school culture, and enabling them to access educational opportunities; it also plays the most critical role in the differentiation of educational opportunities among rural students. Social capital and economic capital respectively exert supportive effects on educational opportunities through channels such as information acquisition, relationship networks, and educational investment, while psychological capital indirectly influences educational outcomes by shaping students' self-identity and academic beliefs. Furthermore, the influence of these capitals is often magnified or suppressed by institutional educational barriers (such as the household registration system, school district policies, and the trend of resource concentration), resulting in rural students being at a disadvantage in the competition for educational opportunities.

To promote substantive equity, the concept of "differentiated support" should be introduced: First, carry out cultural capital enhancement projects in rural schools, such as reading promotion and art education; Second, expand the social capital of students and parents, and enhance their information acquisition capabilities through the pairing of urban and rural schools and parent education and training. Third, improve the economic capital compensation mechanism and provide continuous scholarship and grant support; Fourth, focus on the cultivation of psychological capital and establish an academic planning and psychological counseling system. The implementation of these measures helps to advance educational equity from balanced resource allocation to equal opportunities and capabilities. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the combination of cultural capital theory and social capital theory, revealing the multi-dimensional mechanism by which family background influences educational opportunities for rural students, and emphasizing psychological capital, a supplementary dimension that has received less attention in traditional capital classification. At the practical level, the research suggests that differentiated support policies should be introduced to comprehensively intervene in aspects such as the enhancement of cultural capital, the expansion of social capital, the compensation of economic capital, and the cultivation of psychological capital, in order to achieve the transformation from "formal fairness" to "substantive fairness".

However, this study also has certain limitations. First, the study primarily relies on existing literature and macro-level statistical data, and it lacks large-scale original primary data from empirical investigations. Second, the internal differences among rural student groups have not been fully analyzed, which may have overlooked the disparities in economic development levels and educational supply conditions among regions. Future research can combine quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews in terms of methods to deeply analyze the educational capital structure and its mechanism of action of rural families in different regions and of different types. At the same time, future research can explore the potential of emerging information technologies and online education initiatives in alleviating educational inequality.

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