

How does the concept of 'cultural capital' contribute to our understanding of class inequalities in education?

Education is the primary determinant for young people of their future opportunities, and is heavily influenced by social class, determined well by the concept of 'cultural capital'. What kind of cultural capital the education system is based on, and how it distributes it – or more importantly how it doesn't distribute it – have far reaching effects on the class system as a whole. The name most closely associated with the concept of cultural capital is Pierre Bourdieu, and it is his theories and arguments that will be most closely examined in this essay.

Cultural capital is central to modern interpretations of class, and was first used by Bourdieu to build on the theories of Marx, who related class solely to economic capital; and Weber, who on top of wealth referred to prestige and power. Bourdieu builds on these further to include symbolic capital (status and prestige; the aristocracy for example), social capital (the nature of the social circles we move in and the personal contacts we have) and of course, cultural capital. Cultural capital can broadly be described as our tastes and interests and was first conceived by Bourdieu when trying to "explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes" (Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital* 1983). This is important when examining inequality in education because the ultimate aim of students in education is effectively to gain cultural capital in order to enter a career that will provide them with increased economic capital thus helping class mobility.

If the purpose of schools is to increase the cultural capital of all of its students, then why is there such difference in achievement in relation to social class rather than on merit alone? Firstly it is important to think about cultural capital not just in terms of *how much* one has but *what kind*. Every social group has a certain culture within which different tastes or interests are acceptable and respected – and perhaps more importantly, tastes and interests that are *not* acceptable and respected. For example a working class person who enjoyed drinking beer and whose main interest was football would have trouble fitting in with a group of upper class people; just as an upper class person who enjoyed drinking fine wine and whose main interest was opera would have trouble fitting in with a group of working class people. However, when looking at British society as a whole, the cultural capital of the upper classes is seen as superior. This is because it is the dominant class in almost every aspect of society such as politics, the economy, and of course education; hence the tastes and interests of the upper and middle classes are taken to be those valued by the whole of society and the term 'cultural capital' refers to that of the dominant class. We must also take into account the fact that this view of what constitutes 'high' and 'low' culture is usually widely held by the lower classes themselves, and the reason for this is another of Bourdieu's important concepts - especially when looking at class inequalities in education given its implications for social and cultural reproduction – the habitus.

The habitus of a person essentially determines everything they say and do. Created in the environment of our infancy, it subconsciously controls the way we perceive the world and how we think we should behave in it. Broadly speaking we acquire our cultural capital via our habitus, and this is inextricably linked to class.

“grades simply reward and certify displays of middle class discipline” (Collins, 1979 *The Credential Society*)