

Beyond the Resource Perspective on Educational Inequality: The Latent Roles of Cultural and Social Capital

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Abstract: Based on the current status of educational inequality between urban and rural areas in China, this study transcends the traditional resource-centered perspective to examine the latent roles of cultural and social capital in the distribution of educational opportunities. The research finds that institutional arrangements, family cultural accumulation, social networks, and digital literacy collectively constitute the latent structure of urban-rural educational inequality, determining the access to and conversion efficiency of educational opportunities. Cultural capital influences students' educational adaptability through cognitive abilities, learning habits, and the accumulation of educational resources, while social capital expands educational opportunities through information access and social support. Their interaction exacerbates urban-rural disparities. The study further suggests that achieving educational equity requires a multidimensional coordinated strategy encompassing institutional restructuring, cultural empowerment, social capital development, and digital empowerment, providing both theoretical guidance and practical pathways for policy formulation and educational practice.

Keywords: Educational inequality; Urban-rural disparity; Cultural capital; Social capital; Educational equity

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1. Introduction

Educational equity constitutes a crucial foundation for social fairness and mobility. However, the persistent educational inequality between urban and rural areas in China has become a key constraint on overall social development^[1]. Traditional studies have primarily focused on resource allocation, emphasizing balanced fiscal investment, educational facilities, and teacher distribution^[2]. Yet, empirical evidence indicates that even with increased resource inputs, disparities in educational opportunities and academic achievement remain pronounced, suggesting that educational inequality extends beyond mere resource scarcity and is deeply embedded within institutional, cultural, and social structures.

Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital provide a critical framework for understanding educational inequality. Cultural capital, shaped by family background, cognitive habits, and accumulated educational re-

sources, affects students' adaptability and competitiveness within the educational system. Social capital, derived from social networks, offers information, opportunities, and support, facilitating the implicit reproduction of educational advantages^[3]. In urban-rural contexts, the uneven accumulation of these two forms of capital produces structural disparities in educational opportunities that cannot be fully mitigated by direct resource allocation.

This study aims to move beyond the traditional resource perspective, systematically analyzing the mechanisms by which cultural and social capital shape educational inequality in urban-rural settings, revealing the latent structures influencing educational opportunity distribution. It seeks not only to enrich the theoretical framework on educational inequality but also to provide empirical references for policy-making, advocating multidimensional interventions through institutions, culture, and social networks to promote educational equity^[4].

2. Resource-based perspectives and their limitations

Conventional research on educational inequality has emphasized material resources, attributing unequal educational opportunities to disparities in economic resources, facilities, and teacher quality. Such studies advocate for increasing rural and disadvantaged populations' educational investment, optimizing teacher allocation, and improving teaching environments. While providing practical policy guidance, the resource perspective has significant limitations, as it focuses mainly on quantifiable material inputs and struggles to explain the latent mechanisms and deeper structural causes of educational inequality.

First, the resource perspective neglects the roles of cultural and social capital in shaping educational opportunities. Family background, parental education, language skills, and social networks continuously influence students' learning adaptability, academic performance, and educational trajectories^[5]. Rural students may remain disadvantaged despite having access to the same facilities and teachers as their urban counterparts due to limited family cultural capital.

Second, the resource perspective underestimates the dynamic and interactive nature of educational inequality. The distribution of educational opportunities is affected not only by resource supply but also by institutional design, social networks, and evaluation systems. Consequently, resource inputs often fail to fully translate into educational outcomes, and latent inequality persists. Urban students benefit from informal channels such as family and social networks to gain extra tutoring, information, and practical opportunities, whereas rural students have limited access to these channels.

Third, policies focusing solely on increasing resource inputs often overlook institutional and cultural dimensions of educational equity and cannot address intergenerational transmission of inequality. Educational equity involves not only the quantity of resources but also the structural design of education systems, the diversity of evaluation mechanisms, and the construction of social support networks. Ignoring these latent factors risks superficial policy interventions that fail to achieve substantive equality in educational opportunities^[6].

In sum, while the resource perspective provides a tangible and operational framework, it is insufficient for understanding the multidimensional mechanisms of educational inequality. Addressing this limitation requires integrating cultural and social capital theories, focusing on latent mechanisms and structural characteristics, thereby offering more scientific and systematic theoretical support for policy design.

3. Theoretical framework of cultural and social capital

Educational inequality is rooted not only in disparities in material resources but also in the structural accumulation and reproduction of cultural and social capital. Bourdieu's framework offers a systematic approach to

analyzing latent mechanisms in educational opportunity distribution. Cultural capital comprises three forms: institutionalized, embodied, and objectified. Institutionalized capital refers to recognized qualifications such as degrees; embodied capital encompasses acquired knowledge, cognitive styles, thought structures, and aesthetic competencies; objectified capital includes books, artworks, and other material resources convertible into learning assets. Cultural capital shapes individuals' learning abilities and educational adaptability and, through school evaluation standards, contributes to the reproduction of advantages, influencing educational opportunity allocation among social groups.

Social capital refers to the resources individuals or families obtain through social networks, including information, support, and opportunities. It provides direct educational assistance, such as tutoring, recommendation letters, and access to resources, and confers implicit advantages in school choice, progression, and career development. Its distribution is highly uneven: urban families, benefiting from extensive networks and institutional familiarity, can secure more educational resources for their children, while rural families face constraints in information and social support, resulting in structural educational disparities.

In the urban-rural educational context, cultural and social capital interact to form latent structures of educational inequality. Cultural capital accumulation determines individuals' "fit" within the education system. Urban children, with richer familial cultural resources, possess language, cognitive, and learning skills aligned with school evaluation criteria, gaining early advantages. Rural children, with limited cultural capital, cannot fully convert equivalent educational resources into academic achievement. Social capital provides informal channels for educational opportunities, giving urban students hidden advantages in school selection, competitions, extra-curricular tutoring, and progression pathways, whereas rural students are constrained by limited networks.

Cultural and social capital reinforce and complement each other. Abundant cultural capital enhances the effective use of social capital, while extensive social capital supports further cultural capital accumulation. For example, urban children with strong family cultural backgrounds and parental social networks are more likely to participate in extracurricular programs, arts activities, and tutoring, thereby enhancing their educational advantages. This dual mechanism establishes latent barriers under urban-rural disparities, demonstrating that educational inequality stems not only from resource gaps but also from deep interactions between family and social structures.

Understanding the theoretical framework of cultural and social capital allows moving beyond the traditional resource perspective, viewing educational inequality as the product of intertwined institutional, cultural, and social network factors. Addressing educational inequality requires not only resource redistribution but also interventions in cultural empowerment, social capital development, and institutional design, providing a systematic theoretical foundation for policy-making and educational practice.

4. Analysis of the latent structure of urban-rural educational inequality in China

Educational inequality between urban and rural areas in China extends beyond disparities in resource distribution; it is deeply embedded in institutional design, cultural capital accumulation, social capital distribution, and digital literacy. These factors collectively determine the accessibility and conversion efficiency of educational opportunities, making inequality persistent and intergenerational.

Institutional structures form the core of latent inequality. Despite improvements in compulsory education funding and teacher compensation, the household registration system (*hukou*), student enrollment management, admissions policies, and local fiscal disparities continue to create institutional barriers for rural students.

Rural children face constraints in cross-regional schooling, access to high-quality educational resources, and progression pathways; even when basic educational resources are available, they cannot enjoy the same institutional advantages as urban students^[7].

Cultural capital disparities constitute another major source of latent inequality. Family education levels, cultural background, and pedagogical practices directly influence students' cognitive abilities, learning habits, and educational adaptability. Urban families, with higher educational accumulation, provide children with support in language skills, reading habits, artistic literacy, and learning strategies. In contrast, rural families often lack such cultural resources, leaving rural students at a structural disadvantage in classroom performance, examinations, and higher education choices.

Uneven distribution of social capital further exacerbates differences in educational opportunity. Urban students benefit from extensive social networks, alumni connections, and educational institutions to access tutoring, admissions information, and career guidance, whereas rural students, with limited social networks, face restricted access to informal educational resources. This disparity in social capital not only affects academic performance but also limits educational and social mobility, creating latent barriers.

Although digital education provides new resources, rural areas often lack infrastructure, information literacy, and platform proficiency, resulting in low utilization of digital resources and further reinforcing structural inequality in technological access^[8].

Cultural and social capital function as mutually reinforcing mechanisms, creating a feedback loop of unequal educational opportunities. Urban students leverage abundant family cultural accumulation and extensive social networks to transform cultural capital into educational advantage, whereas rural students face dual limitations, remaining structurally disadvantaged within the education system. This indicates that educational inequality is shaped not only by resource allocation but also by the interaction of institutional, cultural, and social structures.

Understanding these latent structures is essential for moving beyond a purely resource-based perspective and informing policy design. Multidimensional interventions are required: institutional reforms to reduce structural barriers, cultural empowerment to enhance rural students' adaptability, social network expansion to increase educational opportunities, and digital education development to bridge the technological gap. Such coordinated strategies can achieve structural balance in educational opportunities, promoting equity and social mobility^[9].

5. Structural reconstruction and emerging risks in the digital era

While overt disparities in resource allocation are gradually narrowing, latent structures—such as institutional arrangements, cultural capital, social networks, and digital literacy—continue to maintain and reproduce educational inequality. Institutional constraints, including the hukou system, fiscal decentralization, and variations in educational governance capacity, prevent rural students from fully participating in high-quality education despite basic resource availability. In terms of cultural capital, urban families provide implicit advantages in language proficiency, learning habits, and access to educational information, while rural families with limited cultural capital leave students disadvantaged in evaluation and academic competition. Unequal social capital exacerbates these disparities: urban students access information and resources through alumni networks and informal channels, whereas rural students face information asymmetry and network closure. Digital education theoretically offers opportunities to narrow gaps, but disparities in digital literacy, platform

proficiency, and technical support may produce new forms of structural inequality in practice.

Addressing these latent mechanisms requires structural reconstruction strategies. At the institutional level, fiscal redistribution, reform of student enrollment systems, and governance capacity enhancement are necessary to reduce barriers. At the cultural level, curriculum reform, family education guidance, and community cultural initiatives can enhance rural students' cultural capital. At the social level, urban-rural educational collaboration platforms, social organization participation, and public network development can expand social capital. At the technological level, investment in digital infrastructure, teacher digital competency training, and low-threshold learning platforms can improve digital empowerment. Coordinated multidimensional interventions not only mitigate urban-rural imbalances but also break intergenerational educational inequality, supporting social mobility and long-term educational equity, and providing institutional and practical foundations for educational modernization in China ^[10].

6. Policy implications and recommendations

To address latent urban-rural educational inequality, policies should adopt coordinated interventions across institutional, cultural, social, and technological dimensions. Institutionally, fiscal redistribution, enrollment system reforms, and governance capacity enhancement reduce structural barriers. Culturally, curriculum reform, family education guidance, and community-based initiatives build rural students' cultural capital. Socially, urban-rural educational collaboration platforms and social organization involvement expand social capital. Technologically, digital education resources and digital literacy training enhance empowerment. Integrated interventions alleviate imbalances in educational opportunity, disrupt intergenerational inequality, and promote social mobility and educational equity, providing practical pathways and institutional safeguards.

7. Conclusion

Urban-rural educational inequality in China is rooted not only in resource distribution but also in latent structures, including institutional arrangements, cultural capital, social networks, and digital literacy. Resource input alone cannot eliminate structural inequality; achieving educational equity requires multidimensional strategies that integrate institutional restructuring, cultural empowerment, social capital development, and digital support to establish a structurally fair educational system. Only by synergizing institutional justice, cultural support, social networks, and technological capacity can intergenerational educational inequality be effectively broken, urban-rural educational opportunities be balanced, social mobility be promoted, and educational modernization be advanced. This provides both theoretical guidance for policy formulation and practical references for future research on the latent mechanisms of educational equity.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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