



Rethinking Cultural Capital among Secondary Stage Students for Educational Equity and Academic Achievement

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Abstract

Cultural capital has become an important sociological concept in explaining educational inequalities and student achievement outcomes. Based on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, cultural capital describes the ways in which students' educational opportunities and academic success are influenced by their family background, social environment, and institutional structures. Its function in secondary education has been under increased examination in recent years, notably in explaining variations in educational equity and academic achievement of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. This study provides a review of the literature of the existing research on cultural capital among secondary stage students with a focus on its relation to educational equity and academic achievement. Following relevant studies were sought in major academic databases including Scopus and Google Scholar using pre-set inclusion and exclusion criteria. This study synthesises data from theoretical, empirical and methodological perspectives on how cultural capital is conceptualised, assessed and operationalised in research on secondary education. The analysis of reviews exposes that embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms of cultural capital significantly impact students' academic engagement, learning outcomes, and educational success.

Keywords

Cultural capital; secondary school students; educational equity; academic achievement; Bourdieu; social reproduction; educational success; learning outcomes; socioeconomic status

Introduction

Education has traditionally been considered a powerful tool for advancing social justice, eliminating inequality and widening the life chances of individuals. Governments everywhere have expanded access to education, but expanded access has not resulted in equal educational outcomes. UNESCO's 2021 report shows that socioeconomic status of students remains the determinant of learning gaps, with disadvantages students facing tackles due to unequal access of learning resources (UNESCO,2021). These disparities have encouraged researchers to explore factors beyond economic resources, leading to increasing attention toward the influence of cultural capital on students' academic achievement and educational experiences. Cultural capital is a widely discussed concept in sociology that helps explain why students show differences in academic performance even within the same education system.

Bourdieu (1986) explained cultural capital as the collection of knowledge, language abilities, behaviours, and cultural habits that students acquire through their family environment. These resources often align with school expectations, giving some students an advantage in learning. He also argued that schools tend to value the cultural patterns of dominant social groups, which can unintentionally maintain existing social inequalities over time (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Extending this idea, DiMaggio (1982) and DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) suggested that students who regularly engage in cultural experiences such as reading, artistic activities, and exposure to cultural institutions often develop stronger academic skills and perform better in school. Similarly, Coleman (1988) emphasized that positive family relationships, shared values, and strong communication within the home environment support students' learning and academic growth. Several empirical studies have reported that cultural capital is generally associated with higher academic achievement. Students from families with better educational backgrounds, regular reading practices, and richer cultural exposure often achieve stronger academic results (De Graaf et al., 2000; Andersen & Hansen, 2012; Jæger, 2011; Tan et al., 2017, 2019). Research also highlights that parental involvement and a supportive home atmosphere contribute positively to students' literacy and overall school success (Kim & Schneider, 2005; OECD, 2016; Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Dumais, 2002). However, some studies suggest that the influence of cultural capital is not always strong or direct. Its effect may vary depending on school environment, teaching quality, and broader social conditions (Sullivan, 2002; Tramonte & Willms, 2010; Sikora & Pokropek, 2012; Georg, 2004). Lareau (2011) and Lareau and Weininger (2003) further note that differences in measuring cultural capital can lead to inconsistent findings across studies. Overall, cultural capital remains a meaningful yet debated factor in explaining academic achievement, particularly during the secondary stage when students begin shaping their future educational and career paths.

Conceptual understanding of cultural capital

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, language, values, and cultural experiences that individuals gradually acquire through their family, education, and social interactions. These cultural resources shape the way people think, communicate, and engage with learning. Bourdieu argued that students who are exposed to rich cultural experiences from an early age often find it easier to meet school expectations and achieve better academic outcomes.

He classified cultural capital into three forms: embodied cultural capital, which includes knowledge, language proficiency, and attitudes; objectified cultural capital, which consists of cultural resources such as books, artworks, and musical instruments; and institutionalized cultural capital, which refers to officially recognized educational qualifications, including certificates and degrees. Together, these forms of cultural capital influence educational achievement and create opportunities for social advancement.

Review Methodology

This review is based on the study of 50 research publications downloaded from Google Scholar. Keywords including cultural capital, secondary school students, educational equity, academic achievement, and Bourdieu were included in the literature search. Included were only English-language peer-reviewed journal publications from 2019 to 2026. Duplicate and unrelated papers were eliminated, and studies that were pertinent to the review topic were chosen. In order to uncover essential concepts, significant findings, research gaps, and emerging viewpoints on the role of cultural capital in promoting educational equity and academic achievement, the chosen papers were critically analyzed and synthesized using a thematic methodology.

Search String

The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar with combinations of the following keywords connected through Boolean operators (AND, OR): ("cultural capital" AND "secondary school students") AND ("educational equity" OR "academic achievement"), along with related terms such as Bourdieu, school achievement, educational inequality, and student outcomes. The search was limited to English-language, peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2026.

Screening process

Four steps were used in the screening process to guarantee that only pertinent and excellent studies were chosen. Initially, a Google Scholar search was used to find publications pertaining to academic accomplishment, educational equity, cultural capital, and secondary school pupils using predetermined keywords. Second, to determine whether the retrieved papers' titles and abstracts were pertinent to the review's goals, they were screened. Third, studies and duplicate records that were irrelevant to the subject, not peer-reviewed, or not published in English were eliminated. Lastly, the remaining papers' full texts were thoroughly assessed for their contribution to the review, methodological quality, and relevance. After this screening procedure, fifty research papers in all were chosen for thematic analysis and synthesis.

Review Objectives

1. To understand the meaning of cultural capital and its relevance in explaining students' academic achievement.
2. To examine earlier studies that report a positive relationship between cultural capital and academic performance among secondary stage students.
3. To examine research findings that show limited, indirect, or inconsistent influence of cultural capital on students' academic success.
4. To explore how family background, school environment, and social conditions together shape students' learning outcomes and educational equity.

Review of Related Literature

Breinolt and Jæger (2020) conducted a study the extent to which cultural capital contributes to children's educational achievement and whether its influence operates through teachers' perceptions or through the development of students' learning abilities.

Using longitudinal data from the ECLS-K and ECLS-K:2011 studies in the United States, the researchers applied fixed-effects regression models to examine different dimensions of cultural capital over time. The findings suggested that children who regularly engaged in reading demonstrated stronger academic performance because reading helped develop language proficiency, comprehension, and other essential cognitive skills. In contrast, participation in activities such as music, arts, sports, and clubs did not show a consistent positive contribution to academic achievement after controlling for family and personal characteristics. Additionally, there was no proof that teachers consistently gave pupils preference because they had more cultural capital, according to the study. Rather, there was a stronger correlation between students' academic achievement and the practical skills they acquired via worthwhile educational experiences. The authors came to the conclusion that, rather than creating favourable impressions in the classroom, cultural capital largely promotes students' intellectual growth and learning competencies. (Breinholt & Jæger, 2020).

Maunah (2020) examined how students' academic success and cognitive growth in Indonesian higher education are influenced by their family background and social and cultural capital. The results showed that students from well-off families were more likely to have stronger reading habits, richer cultural experiences, and better access to educational materials, all of which aided in their academic development. The study also showed that reading activities and a supportive learning environment played a vital impact in enhancing students' cognitive abilities. The author stated that enhancing educational opportunities and guaranteeing equal access to quality learning resources can assist eliminate educational gaps and promote better academic outcomes (Maunah, 2020).

Mikus et al. (2021) examined how cultural capital affects children's academic performance by looking into how it shapes instructors' assessments of students as well as how it helps them improve academic skills. Based on the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS), the study used a quantitative research approach and structural equation modelling (SEM) to analyse data from 2,975 pupils. Because reading directly benefited learning and cognitive development, the results showed that pupils who regularly participated in reading activities had greater literacy abilities and performed better academically. Participation in theaters, museums, and other cultural activities, on the other hand, was more strongly linked to better school grades than to higher academic competence, indicating that these experiences had a beneficial impact on instructors' opinions of students rather than their actual abilities. Additionally, the researchers found that cultural capital only partially explained the connection between adolescents' academic achievement and parents' educational status. They came to the conclusion that family cultural resources, students' learning behaviours, and school practices interact to create educational attainment, highlighting the need of meaningful learning experiences at home and in the classroom for fostering academic success. (Mikus et al., 2021).

Radulović et al. (2022) examined how the relationship between kids' cultural capital and reading achievement in various OECD educational systems is influenced by teacher support.

Using a quantitative research design, the study compared nations with different degrees of educational equity by analysing data from the PISA 2018 testing. The results demonstrated that the educational context had a significant impact on how effective teacher support was. Supportive teachers improved the reading performance of children with little cultural capital by lessening the learning disadvantages they faced in educational systems that supported greater equity. However, in systems where educational inequities were more prominent, teacher support was less helpful in lowering achievement gaps and, in some circumstances, unintentionally perpetuated existing differences. The researchers came to the conclusion that teacher assistance by itself is insufficient to end educational disparities unless it is combined with inclusive school environments that cater to students' varied learning requirements and equitable teaching methods. (Radulović et al., 2022).

Thomson and Hall (2022) investigated the role that arts education plays in helping English senior secondary pupils build their cultural capital. Focus groups, questionnaires, classroom observations, and document analysis were all used in the mixed-methods study, which included 1,447 students from arts-rich schools. The results, which were informed by Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, showed that students' creativity, self-assurance, emotional health, teamwork, and communication abilities improved when they participated in arts instruction. The study also showed that students' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds affected the value and accessibility of cultural capital, meaning that its advantages were not shared equitably. The authors found that arts-integrated learning helps students' holistic development while raising attention to existing educational inequities (Thomson & Hall, 2022).

Yu et al. (2022) examined how Chinese junior secondary pupils' academic performance is influenced by their families' cultural capital. Using a large national dataset and quantitative analysis, the study indicated that students from households with greater educational backgrounds, better learning resources, and stronger educational support earned superior academic achievements. The results also demonstrated that this link was considerably moderated by parental participation, positive learning attitudes, and goals for further education. The authors found that family cultural capital extends beyond material resources by fostering a supportive learning environment that promotes students' motivation, confidence, and overall academic progress (Yu et al., 2022).

Raudenský (2022) According to the study, students who had a positive self-concept in learning, maintained higher educational objectives, and had a real passion in reading performed better academically than those who just had more cultural materials at home. The findings revealed that a supportive family environment and regular involvement with reading helped build both cognitive and motivational skills, leading to increased school achievement. The study also showed that the development of learning abilities and academic drive had a significantly bigger impact on students' accomplishment than did teachers' perceptions.

The author came to the conclusion that cultural capital, rather than just offering symbolic social advantages, improves educational success by fostering meaningful learning experiences, favorable attitudes toward education, and sustained academic engagement. (Raudenský, 2022). Wang and Wu (2023) examined the contribution of cultural capital on students' academic achievement across OECD countries using PISA 2018 data from 230,972 students in 32 countries. The findings showed that students who had greater access to cultural and educational materials at home typically performed better in reading, arithmetic, and science. The study also found that cultural capital was a critical link between family socioeconomic position and academic achievement, explaining some of the educational advantage enjoyed by students from more fortunate families. In addition, the positive effect of cultural capital was more pronounced in countries with lower levels of income inequality. The authors concluded that the availability of equitable educational opportunities and the students' access to cultural resources may contribute to better academic results and reduce educational achievement disparities. (Wang & Wu, 2023).

Tan and Fang (2023) examined the impact of family cultural and social capital on Chinese teenagers' academic performance. The study was based on data from 11,313 students in Grades 7 and 9 from the China Education Panel Survey (CEPS). It examined the connections between family resources, educational goals, academic effort, and achievement using structural equation modeling (SEM). The results demonstrated that adolescents' higher educational goals and increased participation in learning activities were correlated with positive parent-child interactions, positive parental involvement, and access to educational and cultural resources. However, when adjusting for cognitive and demographic variables, the direct correlation between family capital and academic success was more nuanced. The researchers came to the conclusion that while academic success is also impacted by more general social, cognitive, and school-related factors, family social and cultural capital support students' educational development by encouraging motivation, aspirations, and learning engagement. (Tan & Fang, 2023).

Xie and He (2023) explored the impact of various dimensions of cultural capital on adolescents' academic achievement in the Chinese educational context. The researchers used data from 16,367 students from the China Education Panel Survey (CEPS), and employed a quantitative design with school fixed-effect and mediation analyses. The study concluded that students with better access to educational resources, particularly books and other learning materials at home, achieved higher academic results as these resources enhanced non-cognitive skills and fostered supportive teacher interactions. However, cultural activities alone did not necessarily result in improved academic achievement, given the fact that the education system was examination-oriented and thus, the time spent on academic learning was limited. The authors discussed that the educational value of cultural capital depends on the social and institutional context in which it is experienced.

They concluded that enriching home learning resources and creating supportive educational environments can promote students' academic growth and reduce educational inequalities (Xie & He, 2023).

Pitzalis and Porcu (2024) explored how cultural and digital capital influence students' educational experiences in Italy using PISA 2018 data. The data showed that students from homes with richer cultural resources and stronger educational support often obtained superior academic performance. While digital skills and ICT use were useful for learning activities, they had only a limited influence in explaining academic accomplishment. According to the study's findings, family cultural capital continues to have a greater impact on students' academic achievement than digital capital. (Pitzalis & Porcu, 2024).

Jin et al. (2024) examined how family cultural capital affects middle school kids' academic performance in China, with a focus on gender-based disparities. Using a quantitative research methodology, the study used multiple linear regression analysis to examine data from 1,036 students enrolled in four representative middle schools in Beijing. The findings suggested that institutionalised cultural capital, exhibited through parents' educational achievement, and objectified cultural capital, represented by the availability of books at home, were important predictors of students' academic performance. However, depending on the situation, embodied cultural capital—such as engagement in cultural activities—showed both positive and negative correlations with success. The study also showed clear gender disparities, with fathers' education having a greater impact on boys' academic success while mothers' education had a greater impact on girls' academic performance. The researchers came to the conclusion that improving family cultural capital can promote students' overall academic success and improve educational equity. (Jin et al., 2024).

Yadav and Yadav (2025) examined the impact of the family environment on secondary school students' academic performance by a thorough analysis of psychological and educational literature. The study stressed that students' learning results are greatly influenced by the emotional, social, and educational climate within the home. Better academic success has been linked to a number of factors, including active parental involvement, healthy parent-child communication, emotional support, parents' educational goals, and the availability of a helpful study environment. The scientists also noted that students who grow up in loving and academically supportive households typically acquire better study habits, learning drive, and self-confidence. On the other hand, homes characterized by conflict, inadequate guidance, or limited educational assistance may produce emotional stress and impair students' motivation in learning. The study indicated that boosting family support systems is vital for improving students' academic achievement, supporting holistic development, and creating fair educational opportunities at the secondary school level (Yadav & Yadav, 2025).

Chaturvedi and Tripathi (2026) examined the connection between academic success, cultural capital, and familial background among Banaras Hindu University (BHU) undergraduate students.

36 students from the Social Sciences, Arts, and Commerce streams participated in semi-structured interviews for the study's qualitative methodology. Based on Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory, the researchers discovered that pupils generally showed higher levels of confidence, classroom participation, and teacher recognition when their family had better educational backgrounds and were more familiar with academic culture. On the other hand, students at non-English-medium schools and first-generation learners frequently found it challenging to adapt to academic procedures and institutional expectations. Despite these hurdles, several participants displayed resilience by engaging in self-directed learning, seeking help from peers, and connecting with faculty members to develop their academic talents. The study made clear that individual skill or effort alone cannot account for success in higher education. Instead, it comes from the continual interaction between family resources, cultural experiences, language, and the institutional environment, all of which impact students' academic engagement and educational prospects (Chaturvedi & Tripathi, 2026).

Conclusion

The analysis of the chosen papers unequivocally shows that cultural capital is crucial in determining how well students perform academically in a variety of learning environments. Overall research indicates that students who grow up in academically supportive families with rich cultural experiences and positive learning environments are more likely to perform well in school, though the degree of its influence varies according to social, economic, and institutional conditions. A strong feeling of self-confidence, regular reading habits, parental support, educational goals, and access to books have all been repeatedly identified as critical elements that improve both cognitive and non-cognitive development, ultimately resulting in improved academic achievements. (Breinholt & Jæger, 2020; Mikus et al., 2021; Raudenský, 2022).

The literature review emphasizes that cultural capital has an impact that goes beyond financial resources. Family educational ideals, effective parent-child relationships, emotional support, and meaningful engagement in learning activities generate favourable conditions for sustained academic success (Maunah, 2020; Yadav & Yadav, 2025). Additionally, a number of studies indicate that when schools offer equitable learning opportunities, supportive teachers, and inclusive educational practices that make up for limited family cultural resources, students from disadvantaged social and educational backgrounds can improve their academic performance. (Radulović et al., 2022; Wang & Wu, 2023).

Furthermore, new research shows that while digital competences have grown in significance in contemporary education, they do not take the place of cultural capital's educational advantages. Rather, good literacy skills, parental direction, and a supportive home learning environment are what make digital resources most successful. (Pitzalis & Porcu, 2024). Qualitative data also suggest that first-generation learners often overcome academic problems by tenacity, self-directed learning, and institutional support, despite having comparatively low cultural resources (Chaturvedi & Tripathi, 2026).

Overall, the examined research significantly supports the concept that cultural capital promotes academic achievement primarily by boosting students' motivation, learning habits, critical thinking, educational goals, and confidence rather than merely reflecting social standing. Collectively, these findings underline the need for educational policies and school practices that increase family participation, promote literacy-rich environments, broaden access to cultural resources, and provide equal learning opportunities for all students. Such activities are anticipated to eliminate educational inequities and lead to improved academic attainment as well as the holistic development of learners (Xie & He, 2023; Breinholt & Jæger, 2020; Mikus et al., 2021; Raudenský, 2022).

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