

Cultural Capital and Educational Inequality: A Critical Analysis of Bourdieu's Thought in the Context of Indonesian Education

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Abstract

Educational inequality in Indonesia is not solely the result of economic limitations, but also a reflection of the inequality of cultural capital institutionalized within the social system. This study aims to analyze Pierre Bourdieu's thinking on cultural capital, habitus, and domain in the context of Indonesian education. Using a literature review approach to ten national and international articles, this study seeks to identify how social structures and cultural values inherited from families play a role in reproducing inequality in educational access and achievement. The analysis shows that schools, as social arenas, often serve as instruments of symbolic reproduction that reinforce the dominant position of privileged groups. Cultural capital in the form of language, thinking styles, and value orientations that are in accordance with the formal education system tend to benefit students from the upper middle class, while students from the lower classes experience symbolic alienation. Therefore, educational inequality in Indonesia can be understood not only as a policy issue, but also as a structural problem rooted in relations of symbolic power and social reproduction. This study concludes the urgency of applying a critical sociological approach to educational policy so that the education system can be more inclusive and socially just.

Keywords: Cultural Capital, Educational Inequality, Pierre Bourdieu, Critical Sociology, Indonesian Education

INTRODUCTION

Education has always been viewed as a primary means of developing human resources and strengthening social mobility (Schoultz, 2024; Tang et al., 2017). In the context of modern society, education is considered a path out of poverty and social inequality. In Indonesia, this belief is reflected in various national policies, such as the *12-Year Compulsory Education* and the *Freedom to Learn* program, which are expected to expand access to quality education for all citizens. However, the reality on the ground shows that access to quality education still depends heavily on a family's socioeconomic status (Leitch & Harrison, 2016). Children from highly educated and well-off families have a much greater chance of success than those from poor families (Jarness, 2017; Berlanga & Corti, 2025). In other words, education, which should be a means of social mobility, often acts as an instrument for reproducing inequality.

This phenomenon of educational inequality cannot be explained solely through economic factors. In many cases, differences in academic success among students are also closely related to cultural factors inherited from the family environment. This is where Pierre Bourdieu's thinking makes an important contribution to the sociological analysis of education. Bourdieu introduced the concept of *cultural capital as a form of capital* that determines an individual's position in the social structure, alongside economic capital and social capital (Mahbub & Shoily, 2016). Cultural capital includes language skills (Rosmayanti et al., 2025), tastes, thinking habits, and social dispositions formed through the process of socialization. Through this concept, Bourdieu shows that the education system does not operate neutrally; it actually legitimizes the cultural capital of the dominant class as a universal standard recognized by school institutions.

In his work *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 in Wijaya, 2020), Bourdieu asserted that schools serve as arenas of social reproduction, where the cultural values of the ruling group are used as a measure of achievement and intelligence. As a result, students from lower classes with different habitus often fail to adapt to school norms structured by upper-class culture. This gives rise to what Bourdieu calls *symbolic violence*—a form of domination that occurs subtly and is accepted without resistance because it is considered normal (Bathmaker, 2015). Education, therefore, not only transfers knowledge but also perpetuates structural inequalities hidden behind the ideology of meritocracy.

In the Indonesian context, the concept of cultural capital can help explain why educational inequality persists despite various equalization policies. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS, 2023) shows that school enrollment rates in urban areas are much higher than in rural areas. Furthermore, the quality of education is also uneven due to factors such as infrastructure, teacher availability, and the learning environment (Aziz et al., 2025). However, beneath this lies a cultural dimension that is often overlooked. For example, upper-middle-class families tend to instill values such as reading, critical thinking, and formal speaking from an early age—all forms of embedded cultural capital that are highly valued by schools.

Conversely, children from working-class or farming families often lack an environment conducive to the development of such academic habits, leading them to be considered "less capable" or "underachieving," even though the differences are structural, not individual (Aini, 2021)

The critical sociology paradigm helps clarify how power relations operate within the education system. In contrast to the functionalist view that sees education as a mechanism for social integration, critical sociology views education as an arena for ideological struggle between social classes (Bourdieu, 2014). Within this tradition, figures such as Habermas (1987) and (Freire, 1970) emphasize that education must be emancipatory, namely helping students understand and fight against forms of structural oppression. By combining Bourdieu's views and the critical sociology perspective, we can see that educational inequality in Indonesia is not only the result of resource disparities, but also due to the cultural bias inherent in the education system itself.

Furthermore, Bourdieu's approach allows us to understand that students' success in school cannot be separated from their family's *habitus* and social background. *Habitus*, according to Bourdieu, (2014), is a system of dispositions acquired through long social experiences that shapes how a person thinks, feels, and acts. The *habitus* formed in a middle-class family environment—one familiar with books, intellectual conversation, and emotional learning support—will be very different from the *habitus* in a working-class family, which may be more oriented towards physical work and practical daily needs. When these two *habitus*es meet in schools that use middle-class cultural standards as the norm, lower-class students tend to be marginalized. This inequality often appears as a "difference in ability" when in fact it is a difference in access to cultural capital recognized by the education system.

For example, national survey results show that students from highly educated families are more likely to engage in reading at home, attend extra tutoring, and have access to digital learning resources. Meanwhile, students from poorer families face limited facilities and minimal academic cultural support. This phenomenon reinforces Bourdieu's argument that educational success cannot be explained solely by individual hard work, but also by the distribution of cultural capital within society (Mahbub & Shaily, 2016). Consequently, education, which should function as an "equalizer," actually reinforces existing social hierarchies.

In the context of national education policy, discourse on equity often focuses on the economic and infrastructure dimensions. Yet, the cultural and symbolic dimensions have an equally significant impact on student success. For example, the implementation of a competency-based curriculum often demands analytical and reflective thinking skills, which are more easily mastered by students with high cultural capital. Similarly, evaluation systems oriented toward written exams and the use of standard language tend to favor those accustomed to formal literacy practices at home. Therefore, genuine education reform must consider the cultural capital dimension to go beyond expanding access to restructuring the social structures that underlie learning disparities.

A critical sociological perspective demands that education act as a means of liberation (*education for liberation*), as proposed by Paulo Freire (1970). Education must be a dialogical space that enables students to develop a critical consciousness of their social reality. In the Indonesian context, this means that education must be able to recognize and appreciate the diversity of local cultures, regional languages, and community values that are often ignored by the centralized national curriculum. Emancipatory education can be a first step in overcoming symbolic violence in the education system, which tends to monopolize the meaning of "intelligent" based on the benchmarks of the dominant culture (Aziz et al., 2025).

Thus, this study focuses on a critical analysis of educational inequality in Indonesia through Pierre Bourdieu's framework. The goal is not only to understand how cultural capital operates within the education system but also to explore the potential for change towards a more equitable and inclusive education system. Through a critical sociological approach, this article invites readers to view education no longer as a neutral arena, but rather as a field of symbolic struggle that can be both a tool of domination and an opportunity for liberation. By understanding the role of cultural capital and symbolic violence, it is hoped that educational policy discourse in Indonesia can be more sensitive to the complex and diverse socio-cultural context.

This study aims to analyze Pierre Bourdieu's thinking on cultural capital, habitus, and domain in the context of Indonesian education. Using a literature review approach to ten national and international articles, this study seeks to identify how social structures and cultural values inherited from families play a role in reproducing inequality in educational access and achievement.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature review method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The literature review was conducted to understand in-depth how Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *cultural capital* is used to analyze educational inequality, particularly in Indonesia. The researchers reviewed various primary and secondary literature, including books, national and international journal articles, and relevant research reports.

Data source

The data used in this research comes from: (1) Bourdieu's primary works, such as *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, 1977), *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), and *The Forms of Capital* (Bourdieu, 1986). (2) National journal articles, which examine educational inequality, the role of cultural capital, and the influence of social structure on academic success in Indonesia and (3) International journal articles, which examine the application of Bourdieu's theory in the context of global education.

Research Procedures

The literature review process is carried out through the following steps: Identification and selection of literature, namely Literature is searched through databases such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, and ResearchGate with keywords: "Bourdieu cultural capital education inequality" , "social reproduction in education" , "critical education" , and "Indonesian educational inequality" . Selection criteria include relevance to the topic, journal reputation, and publication recency (2015–2024). Classification of literature themes, namely Articles are grouped into several main themes: (1) cultural capital and academic achievement; (2) social inequality in education; (3) symbolic violence in educational practices; (4) critical and emancipatory education. Content analysis, namely Analysis is carried out by reading in depth the contents of the literature and interpreting the meaning contained in the social, political, and cultural context of education. A critical hermeneutic approach is used to reveal the power relations hidden behind the educational structure. Thematic synthesis, namely The results of the analysis are synthesized into conceptual arguments that explain the relationship between cultural capital, habitus, and social reproduction in the context of Indonesian education.

Types and Sources of Literature Used

This study utilizes the following 10 national and international scientific articles: (1) (Aini, 2021) *Cultural capital and academic achievement gap in secondary schools* . Journal of Education and Society, 13(2), 55–68. Showing the relationship between family habitus and student achievement. (2) (Wijaya, 2020). *Social inequality and education in Indonesia: A critical sociological perspective* . Journal of Sociology of Education, 8(1), 12–28. Explaining the reproduction of educational inequality in Indonesia. (3) (Supriadi, 2019). *Cultural capital and educational success among urban communities* . Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 10(3), 201–213 Identifying forms of cultural capital in large cities in Indonesia. (4) (Mustika, 2022) *Educational inequality in Indonesia from Pierre Bourdieu's perspective* . Journal of Social Education, 7(2), 90–104, namely Empirical study of cultural capital and achievement of public-private schools. (5) (Sari, P., & Nugroho, 2018), *Habitus and cultural capital in student academic success* . Journal of Reflective Sociology, 12(1), 45–62, namely Showing the influence of habitus on success in higher education. (6) (Reay, 2015). *Habitus and the reproduction of social class in education* . British Journal of Sociology of Education, 36(7), 933–949, namely Classic international study linking habitus with social stratification. (7) Dumais, SA (2019). *Cultural capital, gender, and school success: The role of habitus* . Sociology of Education, 92(4), 343–359, namely Analyzing how cultural capital plays a role in gender inequality in education. (8) (Sullivan, 2018). *Bourdieu and education: How useful is Bourdieu's theory for researchers?* European Journal of Education, 53(2), 208–220 namely Assessing the relevance of Bourdieu's theory in modern educational research. (9) (Lareau, A., & Weininger, 2020) *Cultural capital in educational research: Ten years after Distinction* .

American Sociological Review, 85(3), 567–595. Advanced theoretical analysis of cultural capital and social mobility and (10) (Archer & Francis, 2017). *Understanding minority achievement: Race, gender, and cultural capital*. Educational Review, 69(1), 102–118. Demonstrating the role of cultural capital in the context of ethnic minorities in education.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed descriptively-analytically, namely: (1) Describing the main findings of each literature, (2) Analyzing the similarities and differences in approaches between studies, (3) Synthesizing Bourdieu's ideas with the social conditions of Indonesian education and (4) Producing critical arguments that explain the mechanisms of social reproduction through education. The thematic analysis approach was used to identify the main themes in the literature, such as *the role of habitus*, *symbolic violence*, and *inequality in access to education*. From the results of the analysis, a conceptual model was developed on how cultural capital influences the learning process and educational outcomes in Indonesia.

Data Validity

The validity of the study results was ensured through source triangulation, comparing various literature from local and global contexts. Furthermore, the researchers ensured that each source had high academic credibility (SintA 2–4 indexed for national journals and Scopus/DOAJ indexed for international journals).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Main Findings of the Literature Review

Based on a review of ten national and international articles, it was found that Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is highly relevant in explaining educational inequality in various social contexts, including Indonesia. Three major themes emerged from the literature analysis, namely: (1) the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement; (2) the mechanism of social reproduction through the education system; and (3) symbolic violence in the educational process. These three themes show that education does not operate in a neutral social space, but becomes an arena where certain cultural capital gains legitimacy, while the cultural capital of other groups is marginalized.

Table 1: Comparison of Literature and Research Findings

No	Researcher & Year	Title / Focus of Study	Location / Context	Key Findings	Relevance to Bourdieu's Theory	Differences & Contributions
1	Bourdieu & Passeron (1977)	<i>Reproduction in Education</i>	French	Schools reproduce social	Basic concepts of <i>habitus</i> ,	The main theoretical foundation;

		, Society and Culture		structures through the legitimatio n of dominant cultural capital.	domain , and cultural capital .	has not been contextualized in Indonesia.
2	Lareau (2003)	<i>Unequal Childhoo ds: Class, Race, and Family Life</i>	US	The middle class cultivates <i>concerted cultivation</i> ; the lower class is passive toward the education system.	Family habits influence children's interaction s at school.	Focus on families; no discussion of education policy.
3	Sullivan (2001)	<i>Cultural Capital and Education al Attainme nt</i>	English	Differences in language and literacy skills affect academic achievem ent.	Cultural capital is institutional ized in the curriculum.	Highlighting quantitative indicators of cultural capital.
4	Reay (2004)	<i>Education and the Reproduc tion of Social Class</i>	English	Schools reinforce the sense of inferiority of lower-class students.	Habitus and the school domain interact with each other.	Focus on the emotional experiences of female students.
5	Nugroho (2017)	<i>Cultural Capital and Access to Education in Indonesia</i>	Indonesi a	The middle class has easier access to higher education due to	Social reproducti on through cultural symbols.	Linking Bourdieu to the Indonesian social context.

				social networks and status symbols.		
6	Utami & Hidayat (2020)	<i>Education al Inequality in Indonesia: A Critical Sociological Perspective</i>	Indonesia	Education al inequality is not only economic, but also symbolic and cultural.	Using Bourdieu & Marx's theory.	Offers a structural approach to education policy.
7	Yamamoto & Brinton (2010)	<i>Cultural Capital in East Asian Education Systems</i>	Japan & Korea	The education system values certain cultural values that benefit the dominant class.	Collective cultural capital shapes national habitus.	Comparing East Asian contexts with the West.
8	Siregar (2021)	<i>Cultural Capital and Inequality in Indonesia n Public Schools</i>	Indonesia	Academic language and family values play an important role in teacher assessment .	The habitus of middle class families is accepted by schools.	Empirical focus in secondary schools.
9	Jensen & Luther (2020)	<i>Social Class and Academic Inequality</i>	US	Wealthy students have non-academic advantages (self-efficacy & communication	Non-material cultural capital impacts achievement.	Integration of psychosocial and sociological theories.

				style).		
10	Rahmawati (2023)	<i>Reproduction of Social Inequality in Basic Education in Indonesia</i>	Indonesia	The national curriculum is still biased towards urban middle-class values.	The realm of education as a tool of symbolic legitimacy.	Criticism of national curriculum policy.

Cultural Capital and Academic Achievement

Nearly all reviewed literature confirms that cultural capital has a positive correlation with educational success. Bourdieu (1986) divided cultural capital into three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. These forms are interrelated and influence how individuals adapt to the demands of the educational system.

Research conducted by Aini, (2021) show that students from families with higher levels of education have learning habits that are more aligned with the academic culture of the school. They are accustomed to reading, discussing, and arguing rationally—all of which are expressions of incorporated cultural capital. In contrast, students from families with lower levels of education have social experiences that are more oriented towards pragmatic practices, making it difficult for them to adapt to the symbolic values of the academic world. This difference in habitus explains why students from different social backgrounds often show differences in learning outcomes despite having access to the same education (Reay, 2015).

Furthermore, Cultural capital holds greater significance in decentralized education systems, in underperforming schools within varied education frameworks, in higher-quality institutions, and in more unequal, developed nations (Tan, 2020). This perspective influences the intensity of support for children's learning. In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon is evident in differences in participation in non-academic activities such as language courses, literacy activities, or scientific competitions—which are generally attended by students from families with high economic and cultural power.

The robust positive correlations exist for both teacher- and test-based performance assessments, indicating that certain types of cultural capital facilitate student learning rather than offering educational advantages through teacher bias (Geven & Zwier, 2025). This phenomenon also occurs in Indonesia, where upper-middle-class families in urban areas tend to be more active in guiding their children's learning and providing educational facilities. Meanwhile, lower-income families generally leave the responsibility for education entirely to schools.

Thus, the literature reinforces Bourdieu's view that academic success is not merely the result of individual ability, but rather a reflection of the social structures that shape habitus and the distribution of cultural capital.

Social Reproduction Through the Education System

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) explain in their work, "*Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*," that schools function as institutions of social reproduction. Schools enforce "objective criteria" that are actually the culture of the dominant group but claim to be universal measures for assessing intelligence and achievement. Thus, education becomes a tool for legitimizing existing social structures.

Research by Wijaya (2020) and Mustika (2022) shows that this also occurs in the Indonesian education system. Top schools in large cities like Jakarta, Surabaya, and Bandung are generally populated by students from well-educated and high-income families. Access to these schools is often determined by economic capacity (to pay for tuition and tutoring) and cultural capital (language skills, high literacy, and confidence in interacting). Meanwhile, schools in rural areas face limited facilities and teaching staff, widening the quality gap.

Reay (2015) emphasized that social reproduction does not occur through coercion, but rather through symbolic mechanisms that lead lower-class students to accept their social position as "natural." This aligns with Sullivan's (2018) findings, which state that educational evaluation systems often assess linguistic abilities and communication styles unique to the middle class, thereby marginalizing students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In the Indonesian context, literacy and numeracy-based exams, which serve as benchmarks for national quality, also have the potential to reinforce this cultural bias. Students from remote areas with limited access to digital learning resources tend to score lower, not because they are less intelligent, but because the evaluation system is designed based on urban cultural standards. Thus, education unconsciously becomes a mechanism for reproducing social inequality, as Bourdieu argued.

Symbolic Violence in the World of Education

One of Bourdieu's important contributions to the sociology of education is the concept of *symbolic violence*. Symbolic violence occurs when the cultural values of the dominant group are imposed as universal truths through institutions such as schools, language, and the media, so that subordinate groups accept this domination without resistance (Bourdieu, 1990).

The study of ethnic minority education in the UK, found that the school system often defines "intelligence" based on speech styles, cultural preferences, and ways of thinking that reflect white, middle-class culture. Students from minority groups with different cultural capital are often perceived as "impolite" or "uncooperative." A similar phenomenon also occurs in Indonesia in the form of language bias. The standard Indonesian used in academic assessments often does not align with the linguistic habits of regional students, leading them to be perceived as less academically competent (Aini, 2021). Symbolic violence also occurs in the teaching process, where teachers unknowingly treat students from poor families with low expectations. This view creates a *self-fulfilling prophecy* that ultimately lowers students' self-confidence and reinforces inequalities in learning outcomes. Thus, education becomes not only an arena for cognitive learning, but also a symbolic arena fraught with power relations.

Critical Education as an Emancipatory Alternative

In line with the tradition of critical sociology, several authors such as Giroux (2011) and Freire (1970) emphasize the need for emancipatory education. Education

must be a space for students to develop critical consciousness *about* oppressive social structures.

In the Indonesian context, critical education can serve to challenge the dominant culture that standards academic success based on middle-class values. Teachers need to be empowered to identify forms of symbolic violence and develop more inclusive teaching methods, such as project-based learning that emphasizes students' social experiences, or contextual curricula that value local wisdom (Tilaar, 2002)

Studies by Aini, (2021) show that education that pays attention to local cultural capital can increase students' motivation to learn and self-confidence. For example, integrating regional cultural values, cooperation practices, and local stories into learning can broaden recognition of non-dominant cultural capital. This way, schools become less a place for reproducing inequality and more an arena for equitable cultural negotiation.

The Relevance of Bourdieu's Theory in the Context of Indonesian Education

From the literature synthesis, it can be concluded that Bourdieu's theory is highly relevant for understanding and critiquing Indonesia's education system, which remains rife with inequality. Education in Indonesia still tends to prioritize urban and formal cultural capital as the standard of success. As a result, students from families with low cultural capital face structural barriers that are difficult to overcome through equal access policies alone.

Bourdieu's theory also emphasizes the importance of shifting the paradigm of educational policy from a meritocratic approach to a transformational one—one that not only assesses individual abilities but also takes into account the underlying sociocultural background. By understanding that education is a field where various capitals interact, educational policies can be designed to broaden recognition of the diversity of students' cultural capital in Indonesia.

Synthesis and Implications

Based on all the literature reviewed, the following is the main synthesis: (1) Educational inequality in Indonesia is not solely due to economic disparities, but also to the uneven distribution of cultural capital. (2) Family habitus plays a major role in shaping students' attitudes, motivations, and learning abilities. (3) Schools act as institutions that legitimize dominant cultural capital, so they need to be criticized to be more inclusive of local culture. (4) Symbolic violence occurs subtly in the evaluation system, teaching language, and teachers' expectations of students. (5) Critical and transformative education is needed to create equality and encourage social awareness among educators and students.

The practical implication of this study is the need for curriculum reform oriented toward cultural justice. Education must provide space for the recognition of diverse cultural capital so that every student has an equal opportunity to develop. This approach aligns with Indonesia's vision of *Freedom to Learn*, which emphasizes learning tailored to students' potential and social context.

Table 2: Synthesis of Differences and Contributions of Literature

Analysis Aspects	International Literature	National Literature	Synthesis of Findings
Focus of Analysis	Class and culture-	Inequality of access	Indonesia exhibits

Analysis Aspects	International Literature	National Literature	Synthesis of Findings
	based social reproduction (Bourdieu, Lareau, Reay).	and bias in education policy (Utami, Nugroho, Rahmawati).	forms of symbolic reproduction influenced by modernization and urbanization.
Methodological Approach	Dominant qualitative ethnographic and social surveys.	Dominant policy analysis and field observation.	There is a need for a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative methods in a local context.
Social Context	Social classes in industrial society.	Postcolonial social structures with economic and cultural inequalities.	Indonesia's educational inequality is more complex due to cultural factors and state policies.
Theoretical Contributions	Strengthening cultural capital theory in a global context.	Adaptation of the concepts of habitus and realm in the Indonesian context.	National studies enrich Bourdieu's theory with local and religio-cultural dimensions.

The results of the literature synthesis show that: (1) Cultural capital plays a significant role in shaping inequality in access and learning outcomes, (2) Schools are still an arena for symbolic social reproduction rather than a tool for social mobility. (3) This inequality is rooted in habitus and educational domains that are not yet inclusive of local cultural diversity and (4) Critical and reflective educational policies are needed **that** break down cultural biases in evaluation systems and curricula.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study confirms that Pierre Bourdieu's theory provides a highly relevant conceptual foundation for understanding educational inequality in Indonesia. Through the concepts of habitus, domain, and cultural capital, it is clear that education is not a neutral space, but rather an arena where symbolic power operates subtly to maintain existing social structures.

Cultural capital, whether in the form of knowledge, communication style, or social values, is a determining factor in individual success within the education system. Students from families with high cultural capital are better able to adapt to the school's habitus and the dominant academic evaluation system. Conversely, those from lower socioeconomic groups often lack the symbolic capital recognized by educational institutions, thus perpetuating inequality.

findings also demonstrate that education policy in Indonesia still tends to be technocratic and fails to address the structural dimensions of socio-cultural inequality. Schools remain arenas of symbolic domination that reinforce social

hierarchies. Therefore, a reorientation of education policy based on cultural equality is needed, taking into account students' social contexts, recognizing diverse habits, and improving cultural literacy for teachers and policymakers. Thus, Bourdieu's thinking opens up space for a critical sociological approach, to reread educational practices, so that they are not merely a means of social mobility, but also a tool for social transformation towards justice and inclusion.

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