

Parental Social Class and GCSE Attainment: Re-reading the Role of Cultural Capital

Introduction and background

In recent times, the concept of cultural capital has gained traction in English educational policy and has made the transition from social science to educational policy. New guidance from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) states that 'as part of making the judgement about the quality of education, inspectors will consider the extent to which schools are equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life' (Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills, 2019: 10). In a broader theory of cultural and social reproduction, Bourdieu (1973) argued that pupils from more advantaged social class backgrounds have greater stocks of cultural capital which is converted into more favourable academic outcomes.

This paper in the British Journal of Social Education takes a fresh look at the roles of parental social class and cultural capital in inequalities in outcomes at GCSE. It uses data from *Understanding Society* and linked administrative education records from the National Pupil Database. *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) is a major longitudinal study which follows participants over time, regularly collecting data about individuals and their households.

Key points and findings

Methodology

- The administrative educational data linked to the UKHLS spans the school academic years 2009-10 to 2012-13. During this period, GCSEs were graded alphabetically. The researchers assign an A* grade 8 points, an A grade 7 points, a B grade 6 points, a C grade 5 points, a D grade 4 points, an E grade 3 points, an F grade 2 points, and a G grade 1 point. Unclassified U grades are assigned 0 points. The educational outcome variable analysed in this study is the young person's total school GCSE points.
- Parental social class is measured using the UK National Socio-Economic Classification. This is an occupation-based social class measure. It is associated with 3 key elements of individuals' economic lives: their income security, their short-term income stability, and their longer-term income prospects.
- This research uses 14 indicators of cultural capital linked to questions in the UKHLS. Eight of these relate to 'highbrow cultural participation', such as visits to the theatre, and 6 relate to reading activities. Indicators relate to both parents' and children's responses in the survey. This yields a total of 4 measures: parental highbrow participation, children's highbrow participation, parental reading activities, and children's reading activities. These measures reflect the total number of highbrow activities (i.e., goes to the theatre, museum, or historic places) or reading activities (i.e., reads for pleasure, goes to the library, or discusses books) undertaken by either parent, or by the child.
- There are moderate associations between parental occupational social class (NS-SEC) and parental highbrow activities, children's highbrow activities, and parental reading activities.
- There are sizable occupation-based social class inequalities. For example, the mean GCSE score for pupils from families in NS-SEC 1.2 (Higher professional occupations) is 28 points higher than the mean for pupils from families in NS-SEC 7 (Routine occupations).
- Pupils who participate in highbrow cultural activities, or have parents who participate in highbrow cultural activities, have higher mean school GCSE scores than those who do not.
- Similarly, pupils who engage in reading activities, or have parents who engage in reading activities, also have higher mean school GCSE scores.
- The 4 cultural capital measures (parental highbrow participation; children's highbrow participation; parental reading activities; children's reading activities) each provide a marginal increase in the proportion of variance. However, parental highbrow participation and children's highbrow participation are not statistically significant when parental reading activities and children's reading activities are included in the model. The strongest links to GCSE outcomes are therefore occupation-based parental social class, parental reading activities, and children's reading activities.
- Occupation-based parental social class is an important element of inequalities in school GCSE outcomes. The measures of cultural capital provide only a small additional explanation of the inequalities. Although cultural capital is unequally distributed across the occupation-based social class categories, the associations are fairly weak.
- Parental and children's reading activities are significant, but they only explain 4-5 per cent of the

Results

- There is no significant relationship between children's reading activities and their parental occupation-based social class.



variance in GCSE outcomes. Reading activities play a much less influential role than occupation-based social class in explaining social inequalities in school GCSE outcomes.

- Children's reading activities are important. Engaging in 2 or 3 reading activities, on average, increases the pupil's GCSE score by between seven and nine points.
- Overall, the results of this study do not support the argument that parental occupation-based social class inequalities in school GCSE outcomes are reduced when detailed measures of cultural capital are included.

Conclusions

- Having investigated using multivariate statistical analyses, the researchers investigated the role of both occupation-based social class and cultural capital and concluded that measures of cultural capital provide little additional explanation of inequalities in school GCSE outcomes.
- The empirical analyses in this study show that engagement in highbrow cultural activities is not important, but that reading activities are influential. This finding supports earlier research on the effects of cultural capital on educational outcomes in school GCSE.
- The influence of parental reading behaviours may operate through 'passive role modelling', whereby children living in households in which adults actively engage in reading activities may be more likely to engage in reading activities themselves.
- In this study, the persistent significance of parental education, even when measures of cultural capital are included in the models, shows that although parental education is associated with cultural capital, it should not be used interchangeably. The researchers therefore warn against the uncritical use of parental education as a measure of cultural capital.
- If schools are serious about reducing educational inequalities, the empirical findings in this study send a clear message. In order to support groups of pupils who may be projected to have lower school GCSE outcomes, schools would be better placed to concentrate on increasing reading activities. The findings further demonstrate that this would be in addition to more directly targeted policy interventions to reduce the stark social class attainment gaps, which are consistently observed in school GCSE outcomes.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01425692.2022.2045185>