

# Cultural capital as the contributor to educational success

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Education has largely been viewed as a means to secure employment and achieve upward social mobility (Carl, et al., 2012), especially so in meritocratic states such as Singapore. The idea of credentialism – the focus on academic qualifications in evaluating competency, perpetuates most industrialized society and is “ directly linked to employment” (Carl, et al., 2012, p. 141). Difference in academic achievements invariably affects employment, leading to social stratification that results in a class structure. Hence, it is imperative that an individual succeeds in education in the current society. The term “ educational success” can be rather subjective; for the purpose of this paper, it refers to educational attainment – the level of schooling (High school, college, post-graduate etc) and/or academic achievements – examination grades. One predominant factor affecting educational success is cultural capital as proposed by Bordieu (as cited in Carl, et al., 2012). This essay explores the theory of cultural capital and its relationship to educational success; analyse how class affects cultural capital and in turn influences educational success; and evaluate alternative factors which impacts it.

Cultural capital is the inventory of “ knowledge, behaviour and skills” passed down by family, both tangible and intangible, to show cultural understanding and social position (Cole, n. d., para. 2; Tan, 2015). Bordieu (as cited in Wu, 2008) further stated that there are three forms of cultural capital: “ Embodied high-status culture, cultural goods or resources, and institutionalized cultural qualifications” (p. 203). The first refers to knowledge gained through learning; the second refers to material goods people own which is valued by society; and the third refers to how cultural capital is

quantified (Cole, n. d.). To illustrate the relation to education, cultural capital can take the form of soft-skills acquired through socializing; books or electronic gadgets applicable to education; and academic qualifications – all of which are valued in the school system as it enhances knowledge and promote the proper functioning of society. Research has shown that there is a high positive correlation between cultural capital and educational attainment (Evans, Kelley, Sikora, & Treiman, 2010). Furthermore, Wu (2008) also reported that families in China tend to provide more cultural capital for students to help them succeed in education. These information signify that cultural capital can influence educational success. However, the amount of cultural capital differs among different strata of society with a class structure (Carl et al., 2012).

Class is a form of social stratification, it groups, ranks and reward individuals based on wealth, power and prestige; the distinction of class is determined by the difference in the three components an individual possesses (Carl et al., 2012). Bordieu (as cited in Carl et al., 2012) described cultural capital as a subset in the system of capital that further includes economic and social capital. The three forms of capital work in an interlinking system which mutually affects each other (Cole, n. d.). Therefore, an individual from a higher class possesses more cultural capital than one from a lower class because more economic capital or social capital results in more cultural capital. A recent survey shows that there is a distinct gap in the number of students in Australia pursuing higher education between students from lower and higher socioeconomic background (Bowden & Doughny, 2009 cited in Carl et al., 2012). Similarly, students from top junior colleges in Singapore <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-capital-as-the-contributor-to-educational-success/>

has purportedly paid for professional services to aid them in securing a spot in prestigious universities (“ Students Pay for Help”, 2014). It can be argued that the family of the students in the article belong to a higher class due to the high cost of the professional aid; those from the lower class who cannot afford such services will then lose out. Thus it can be observed that students from a higher class entails more cultural capital which in turn influences educational success because more opportunities are presented to them. However, the study done by Evan et al. (2010) shows that cultural capital is independent of family background, this contradicts Bordieu’s notion of inequality of cultural capital due to class. This contradictory finding signifies possible alternative factors, independent of class, influence educational success.

The mental capacity of individuals, which is biologically based, can be a factor that influences educational success. Academia, after all, requires the processing of information which is the function of the human brain. This genetically-determined capability results in intellectual differences among students. Research has suggested that general intelligence contributes largely to academic achievements (Deary, Strand, Smith, & Fernandes, 2007). Proponents of conflict theory may argue that this inequality in intelligence is caused by the lack of cultural capital due to class difference; however, this notion simply ignores the difficulties faced by students born with lower level of general intelligence, such as the mentally impaired. There will be no need for special schools catered to such students if the situation could be improved by giving equal access to resources for all. Thus,

individual differences in mental capacity can affect educational success and is independent from the influences of class.

Rosenthal and Jacobson (as cited in Carl et al., 2012) theorized the phenomenon known as the “teacher expectancy effect – the impact of a teacher’s expectations on a student’s performance” (p. 139) influences almost all students. The teacher expectancy effect influences the students’ view of the self, which in turn impacts academic achievements (Kuklinsky & Weinstein, 2001 cited in Carl et al., 2012). In this case, the teacher’s expectation labels the student; this creates a self-fulfilling prophecy as the student tries to match the label (Carl et al., 2012). It can be observed that the teacher expectancy effect influences the self-perception of the student and has a potential to influence educational success. Critics may mention that the effect is influenced by cultural capital as having more cultural capital improves a teacher’s expectation on a student. However, there is also no indication that less cultural capital results in less expectation. Further research is required to arrive at more conclusive results.

In conclusion, educational success is key to securing employment in the current stratified society. Cultural capital valued by the school system has been identified as a contributor to educational success. The class structure affects the amount of cultural capital an individual possesses, resulting in unequal opportunities for students, ultimately affecting educational success. While cultural capital is essential for educational success, it is not the sole determinant as alternative factors such as the mental capacity and teacher’s expectancy towards the student influence educational success too. Bordieu’s

cultural capital theory is also not without criticism - Lareau and Weininger (as cited in Wu, 2008) critiqued the applicability of the theory outside of France, where it originated. This possibly also explains the discrepancy in Evan et al.'s (2010) finding which contradicts Bourdieu's notion of inequality of cultural capital due to difference in class. Taken together, this essay suggests that cultural capital does not fully determine the chances of an individual in obtaining educational success; class difference, therefore, also does not predict an individual's chance of achieving educational success.