

Education study-guide 8

Marxism – cultural capital theory

The Marxist educationalist, **Pierre Bourdieu (1984)** acknowledges that economic capital or financial supports offered by parents is important in **ensuring middle-class educational success, but he argued that cultural capital is just as influential.**

Cultural capital refers to the **knowledge, tastes, language, values and behaviour transmitted by middle-class parents to their children, giving them the ability and confidence to interact with teachers.**

Bourdieu suggested the following;

- (1) Middle-class parents encourage **cultural experiences** such as visits to museums and art galleries.
- (2) Middle-class parents encourage their children to take an interest in books and reading.
- (3) Middle-class parents **stress the importance of education, especially university.**
- (4) **Schools value children with cultural capital because schools are middle-class environments.**
- (5) Working-class children experience a **cultural deficit** – they lack cultural capital through no fault of their own or their parents.
- (6) The concept of **'habitus'** is central to an understanding of cultural capital. **Habitus refers to a set of attitudes and values which naturally permeate the home experience of the middle-classes.** For example, middle-class parents may invest time and money (without a second thought) in their children's education and acquisition of cultural capital because this was their experience of parenting during their own childhood.
- (7) **Schools also reflect a middle-class habitus because the ethos of teaching and learning approves of and values particular ways of speaking, courtesy, classroom behaviour, tastes and preferences which middle-class parents are likely to have imbued in their children as part of their socialisation.**
- (8) Middle-class children acquire **'symbolic power'** at school. Their ways of speaking, tastes and preferences are seen by teachers as having **greater value** than those of working-class children.
- (9) The dismissal of working-class culture by schools as having less value than middle-class culture is a form of **'symbolic violence'** that contributes to their underachievement.

Marxist thinkers often claim Bourdieu as one of their own because he argues that **cultural capital leads to cultural reproduction: the children of middle-class**

professionals will also become middle-class professionals (not out of merit but because their parents have equipped them with cultural capital which is highly valued by middle-class teachers).

There is some evidence that the **marketisation of both state and private education** focuses on educational experiences that might appeal to students with cultural capital. For example, enrichment opportunities such as extra-curricular activities and preparation for Oxbridge interviews.

Social capital

Putnam (1995) focuses on the concept of 'social capital'. This refers to **membership of social networks that can bring about particular benefits. Middle-class parents are more likely to know the 'right' people.** Knowing these influential people may be advantageous to their children in terms of gaining them access to good schools, universities and work placements. For example, if a middle-class child is denied access to their parents' choice of school, the parents may know fellow-professionals who are part of the appeal process or teachers who may be able to offer useful advice in constructing a successful appeal. For example, there is evidence that middle-class parents are more likely than working-class parents to attend church or get involved in religious activity in order to get their child into a high-achieving primary or secondary church school.

Alice Sullivan (2001) researched Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital via a questionnaire survey of 465 students approaching school-leaving age. The questionnaire operationalised and measured cultural capital by asking students about their tastes in books, television and music, and visits to theatres, concerts, art galleries and museums. **She concludes that cultural capital is transmitted within the middle-class home and that it does have a significant effect on GCSE performance, although she is critical of Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and even 'cultural capital' which she describes as 'unhelpfully vague' and therefore difficult to operationalise.** Also, **Bourdieu does not account for individual agency and choice.** Sullivan claims that although cultural capital has some impact on differential rates of educational success and failure, **it only partly explains the social class effect.**