

# Understanding Social Justice and Equity in Chinese Exam-oriented Education- Comparing Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Reproduction and Nussbaum's Theory of the Competence Approach

Yuhan Dong\*

College of Social Science, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland, G12 8QQ, United Kingdom

\* Corresponding Author Email: 2200902044@cnu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** Test-based education in China is often seen as an educational system that focuses on test scores, memorization and problem-solving, with the main aim of improving students' adaptive skills. However, there are problems with this model that inhibit students' autonomy and creativity. This paper will therefore compare Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and social reproduction with Nussbaum's theory of a competency-based approach to understanding social justice and equity in Chinese exam-based education. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction objectively examines the development of students in test-based education at the level of "capital", where each student's academic performance is determined by multiple capitals. Nussbaum's competency approach theory explains the problems with this model in terms of freedom and choice, and that it is up to the student to decide what functions are valuable. The competency approach theory has been found to provide a more comprehensive and human-centered explanation of teaching to the test. There are therefore various drawbacks to teaching to the test, so how to overcome or mitigate these drawbacks is something that needs to be taken seriously in education today.

**Keywords:** Exam-oriented Education, Bourdieu, Cultural reproduction, Nussbaum, Competence approach.

## 1. Introduction

Exam-oriented education is frequently viewed as that of an education system that focuses on exam results, rote learning, and problem-solving with the main intent of enhancing students' ability to take exams and is not the opposite of quality education [1]. It was the only education system that prevailed in medieval and renaissance East Asia and Europe because it allowed for the training of many skilled people under the guidance of masters and through rigorous training. However, after capitalist reforms increased demand for pioneering generalists, European and American countries gradually shifted to "quality education," whereas East Asian countries insisted on the examination-oriented system. This type of education is part of the duck-feeding system, where knowledge is poured down the throats of students as if they were ducks [2]. That is, the ducks are fed sugary feed to fatten them up quickly, while other variables, such as their ability to paddle and survive, are not prioritized.

When used in the context of standard teaching methods that are oriented toward general competitiveness, the test can be a better index of learning effectiveness; however, when the test score becomes the goal of teaching, it loses its value as a useful indicator of the state of education and can lead to undue distortion of schooling. Some opponents, on the other hand, have only made surface-level criticisms of test-based education, without delving deeply into the causes and dangers of exam-oriented education. As a result, it is necessary to investigate the mechanisms of its operation.

To provide an in-depth explanation of exam-oriented education in China, this paper employs Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction and Nussbaum's theory of capability approach. To begin, the relationship between test-based education and social justice and equity in China is discussed. The paper then summarizes and discusses the key concepts and content of Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction and Nussbaum's theory of capability approach and human flourishing in relation to teaching to the test. Finally, the paper contrasts the two theories' strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the causes and dangers of teaching to the test can

further adapt to the current educational environment in China and provide better educational models and policies for all students.

## **2. Test-Based education and social justice and equity in China**

### **2.1. Social justice and equity**

According to the redistributive justice model, everyone should have the same rights and opportunities to share resources in a fair and equitable way. Rawls articulates two principles of justice [3]. First, everyone has an equal right to the dissemination of foundational rights and duties [3]. Second, unequal arrangements emerge when one's interests are recognized, particularly those of society's most vulnerable groups [3]. In terms of education, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights has become one of the world's most influential social justice texts. It highlights that while everyone has the right to an education, education should be free (at least at the basic phase). Most governments concurred with its principles and put them into action. Government efforts to equalize access and quality education have greatly increased access to education for many low-income families. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of exam-oriented education has had an impact on the principle of equal education.

### **2.2. Inequity in exam-based education**

#### **2.2.1 Selective education of excellence**

Although exam-oriented education is only one educational model, its widespread utilization inevitably brings with it some issues of educational injustice. To initiate with, exam-oriented education falls under the category of selective education of excellence. In the exam-oriented education system, it appears that all students in a class attend the same classes and acquire the same education and influence from the same teacher, as if they have the same instructional opportunities and rights. However, the teacher's attention is always focused on the few students who will advance to higher levels of school, and they are given higher expectations and more care [4]. For example, the teacher's enthusiastic gaze lingers on them all throughout the lecture, and he or she could inform how well they understand the material by modifications in their expressions, movements, and postures. When asking questions, intermediate students always ask questions that the top students can answer but since that they would acquire new knowledge or deepen their understanding and consolidation of old knowledge through active thinking and rich association. Small classes are frequently delegated to top students in extra-curricular tutorials to broaden their horizons, or comprehensive exercises are assigned to develop their ability to solve complex problems. Intermediate and disadvantaged students, on the other hand, demonstrate slight active interest and are virtually neglected. Teachers' differentiated attitudes toward students result in unequal access to education, exacerbating the divide between them in terms of academic performance and moral character, and ultimately causing a 'Matthew effect' (the better the students, the worse the students) in student development [5]. This ostensibly equitable education is inequitable. It only affects in a few students being the best and the majority being the losers. This is not only an outstanding example of undemocratic education, but also constitutes a substantial waste of human resources.

#### **2.2.2 Widening the disparity between schools**

On the other hand, it widens the disparity between schools, leading to inequity in school development and student access to education. At the end of the Ten Years' Catastrophe, the country's situation is dire. The national economy was on the verge of collapsing, education was in shambles, and a significant talent gap existed. The state made full use of its limited human, material, and financial resources to restore and prioritize the operation of several key schools across the country. It should be noted that the establishment of key schools has aided in the acceleration of talent development and meeting the urgent needs of talents for economic and social development. However, with the intensification of exam-oriented education, the leadership has placed far too much emphasis

on the key schools and demonstrated significant concern for them by investing in financial resources, selecting management cadres, equipping teachers, and promoting advanced experience. The significance of key schools in the community cannot be overstated. This has expanded the gap between key and ordinary schools and led to the formation of several underperforming schools. Poor leadership, low-quality teachers, and poorer operational and student population conditions categorize these schools. The vicious cycle conveys these schools' unsustainable year after year. This, in spin, creates inequity in school development and student access to education. This situation has behavior effectively in a waste of educational resources and is incredibly detrimental to education.

### **3. Theory of Bourdieu on Cultural Capital and role of education in social reproduction**

#### **3.1. Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Reproduction**

Pierre Bourdieu is a contemporary French sociologist. He contended that the educational structure comprises a hidden mechanism for the reproduction of gross inequalities, and that education has replaced gentrification, religion, and direct political and economic background as a new mechanism of inequality.

One of Bourdieu's most iconic concepts, as well as one of the most popular among educational researchers, is the concept of "cultural capital," which has been used as a theoretical tool in many studies of educational inequality. The idea of cultural reproduction is indeed one of the central explanations for the persistence of educational inequalities. Bourdieu includes the concept of cultural capital and habitus to explain the process of cultural reproduction through the educational system, as well as the influence of social origin on educational outcomes. Bourdieu contends that cultural capital, habitus, social structures, fields, and practices should be investigated through an integrated theoretical framework; he also employs the equation "[cultural capital] (habitus) + field = practice" to demonstrate the connections between these concepts [6].

Marx's concept of "capital" clearly influenced Bourdieu's conception and interpretation of "cultural capital." In Marx's *Capital*, capital is the value that generates surplus value, and while the worker is the capital of manual labor, the capitalist also becomes the capital of figurative language. Bourdieu broadens Marx's concept of "capital" to include all the tangible goods invested in the production process and workforce that can be converted into tangible goods ("economic capital"), but also intangible cultural policies and social relations, referred to as "cultural capital" and "social capital." Cultural capital is the exclusive possession of a particular type and quantity of cultural resources, which can take three forms: the encapsulated state ("cultural competence"), the objectified state ("cultural product"), and the institutionalized state ("cultural institution"). The amount of cultural capital a person has is influenced by a variety of contextual differences, including the class and stratum to which something he or she belongs, as well as the family, and affects his or her favorable or unfavorable position in each arena [7].

#### **3.2. Habitus**

Habitus is another crucial but open-to-interpretation concept in Bourdieu's sociological thought. It's significant since it's a critical instrument in Bourdieu's rebuttal of intentionalism critics, and it's ambiguous because it's frequently confused with "habitus." "Habitus" was once translated as "habit" in the early days of Bourdieu's thought in mainland China, but scholars began to adopt the translation "habit" after the publication of the Chinese version of his introduction to *Rethinking Sociology*. What Bourdieu refers to as "habitus" is a framework of categorical schemas of perception, evaluation, and action deduced from practice, with a certain stability and self-extension; such a system arises in the social system and exists in the individual body. Chinese scholars have developed various definitions of "habitus," but they all agree that habitus is both individual and social, objective, and subjective. A "habit," as defined by Dong Zefang et al is indeed a mechanism of habits and temperaments

developed by people as social subjects in an emerging social environment as a consequence of the interplay between individual subjectivity and social objectivity [8]. "Habitus is a cognitive and motivational mechanism that concretizes the influence of an individual's social context, providing a broadcaster or medium through which information and resources are channeled into the actions they inform," Bao Yaming explains [9]. Thus, the interaction of objective contexts and the immediacy of the situation of activity are communicated via habitus. Dong Zefang et al. argue that habit is a result, while Bao Yaming emphasizes habit's mediating role as a product of history in lived practice. This illustrates that the concept of 'habit' differs significantly from what people commonly refer to as "habit," which either refers to the result of the subject shaping the surrounding world or the subject adapting to the external environment, culminating in Habit being more subjective and dynamic. The connection between habitus and field is not a simple one of "determining" and "being determined," but rather one of "ontological correspondence."

### 3.3. Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Reproduction and exam-oriented education

Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction aids in understanding the social inequity or inequality of test-based learning. The reproduction theory emphasizes the currently underway unequal distribution of capital among social classes. The Chinese government is attempting to make education universal and to promote educational equity so that children from various social structures have equal access to education. However, following the reinstatement of China's college entrance examination system, many people believe that the college entrance examination is the only way to select talents, and the influence of this thinking has given rise to a culture of teaching to the test. As a result, teachers focus on a small number of students based on their academic performance or individual ability, whilst also ignoring the majority's development. However, many capital factors influence a student's academic performance. Because each student was raised differently in his or her family and has different capital, the acquisition, accumulation, and starting point of cultural capital differs for each student. Boys' academic performance was significantly higher than girls', according to Baoyan and Minggang, and household, family, and school social capital all influenced academic performance [10]. Academic achievement is impacted by low economic income, so even though high economic income does not always advertise academic achievement. Academic achievement-focused education has a direct positive impact, whereas parent-teacher relationships, dehumanized cultural capital, and financial capital always have a negative impact. The educational level of a father has a substantial impact on academic achievement. Financial power indirectly contributes to academic achievement through the mediating role of parental educational expectations, educational support, and schooling concerns, whereas objectified cultural capital represents the effect of economic capital on academic achievement. Wenya Cheng, for example, utilized educational reform during the Cultural Revolution to investigate the causal relationships between parents and their children's academic achievement in China in 2017 [11]. It was discovered that increased parental education leads to better student achievement for the next generation, and that the impact of parental education evolves as children's educational attainment gains momentum.

The current Chinese system of teaching to the test, which widens the gap between schools and creates inequality in school development and student access to education, can be explained by Bourdieu's theory of habituation. Habitus is defined as a natural habit that has developed over time. As previously stated, following the Cultural Revolution, the state made full use of the very limited human, material, and financial resources accessible to restore several key schools to accelerate developing talent. This was done to meet the urgent need for talent for economic and social development, and it was effective. Investment in key schools has been retained subjectively in the modern world of exam-oriented education. This long-standing, socially diverse 'habit' has an immediate impact on students' adaptation to the curriculum and teaching methods. Habitus shapes the profession of people who maintain an excessive focus on priority schools in the field of education, in collaboration with capital. As a result, investments in school facilities, teachers, and curriculum reform measures, as well as different social classes, can exacerbate social inequity or inequality in

exam learning. As a result, achieving equity in education is dependent not only on improving hardware and teachers, but also on providing care and attention to children from socially disadvantaged groups. More concern, compassion, and assistance should be provided to those who are socially disadvantaged. For the educated individual, he or she must confront the influence and restraint of social values and norms, make full use of, and transform his or her capital, and constantly improve himself or herself.

## **4. Theory of Nussbaum on Capabilities Approach and Human Flourishing**

### **4.1. Competence Approach Theory**

The normative commitment which conceptualizes well-being in terms of capabilities and functions is at the heart of the capabilities approach. Functions are a person's various states and activities, such as being well-nourished, married, educated, and travelling, whereas capabilities are the real or substantial opportunities they must achieve these acts and beings. A person's "competence set" denotes the set of competencies that he or she can choose from, while the term "basic competencies" refers to the "innate equipment of the individual that is necessary for the development of more advanced competencies", such as speech and language, which are present in newborns but need to be developed, or the freedom to do basic things considered necessary for survival and averting or escaping poverty or other severe deprivation [12]. The capability approach reorients education in terms of its intrinsic value and its role in broader social development. Individual capabilities are determined by the freedom they must have to pursue lifestyles and ways of behaving that they value. It is the potential combinations of functions (physical presence and behavior) that are important, not the ability to perform individual functions [13]. The importance of freedom to do, freedom to choose, and freedom to act is fundamental to Nussbaum and Sen's version of the "capability approach." Sen refers to this as the "opportunity aspect of freedom," a space for realizing the "comprehensive range of opportunities," rather than just the culmination of plans and goals. This is critical because the realization of a capacity, behavior, or presence can conceal a lack of choice or agency [14].

The capability approach needs to prioritize dignity, emphasizing the individual rather than implying who should be able to achieve the plans and goals they value and focusing on everyone's right to flourish and be treated equally.

### **4.2. Nussbaum's Theory and exam-oriented education**

The capability approach developed by Nussbaum aids in understanding the social inequities or inequalities that exist in exam-based education. In China, test-based education has been practiced for a long time. The first point to emphasize is that access to education is a valuable competency in and of itself, and it influences other aspects of competency as well. According to Nussbaum, receiving a good education is extremely beneficial in acquiring and expanding other types of competencies. In India, for example, a woman's education greatly increases her ability in other areas, such as participating in politics on an equal footing. Nussbaum's theory highlights the importance of society providing people with capabilities, but it also emphasizes the importance of not pressurizing people to learn specific functions. In other words, it should be up to individuals to determine what types of components are valuable. Thus, in China's compulsory education, people should have the freedom to choose whether to perform such functions, but this is clearly not the case. The reason for the long existence of exam-oriented education is that it has provided access to higher education for people from poor and backward areas. However, such access is not free or equitable. The first point worth making is that investing in education is a vital skill within itself. However, there are a quantity of phenomena in exam-oriented education. One is that, in comparison to priority schools, ordinary schools that receive insufficient educational investment do not have the financial resources or teaching staff to support their own students in receiving the same quality of education as those in priority schools. The other thing that is different is that in the same educational environment, students with good academic performance have always had more access to education than those with mediocre

or poor academic performance. As a result, poorer areas invest less in education and teachers are given fewer benefits; as a result, the best teachers naturally continue to study in schools that invest more in education. Although these ordinary schools are capable and live up to their name, education to the test as a function is not of sufficient value to them, and their choice is not truly free, but is compelled by circumstances.

## **5. Theory comparisons between Bourdieu and Nussbaum**

### **5.1. The theory of Bourdieu's strengths and weaknesses**

Cultural reproduction theory is a theoretical and analytical framework that reveals how educational systems work and has a significant impact on education and sociology.

Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory provides a theoretical framework for examining educational equity and the involvement of educational reproduction in a test-oriented educational context. Following in his footsteps, people must look beyond the issue of equal access to education and investigate how cultural capital and social stratification can improve the educational underachievement and motivation of community children to create a relatively level basic education system that realizes the full potential of the individual. As mentioned in 3.1, these three forms are related to the interests that Bourdieu contends are at the root of social inequality, and that teaching to the test obscures the essence of this interest by framing it as a matter of individual ability rather than a social problem. However, Bourdieu's theory focuses on capital and its transformation while ignoring social class mobility. First, teaching to the test is an educational model in which some low-income students who do not attend key investment schools can achieve good academic results and thus gain social status. The second flaw is that Bourdieu's theory does not account for the human initiative, as many students are forced to learn to improve their grades, stifling their ability development. Based on the preceding analysis, the emphasis on examination-based curriculum and the disregard or even elimination of non-examination-based curriculum has severely weakened the scientific and complete structure of the primary and secondary school curriculum, resulting in students' cognitive structure, knowledge structure, and ability structure being incomplete and severely imbalanced.

### **5.2. Nussbaum's Theory's strengths and weaknesses**

Nussbaum's ability theory is powerful because it introduces the concepts of function and ability and explains exam education in the context of freedom and choice. This educational model can allow poor children to freely choose their educational opportunities. However, these under-invested schools, as well as the children who do not perform well, are not treated equally. Some students work hard to reduce this inequality and avoid falling behind. Exam-oriented education is so focused on raising students' test scores that it deprives them of the ability to learn new skills. The one-sided emphasis on test-taking subjects, for example, has dismembered the science and integrity of the curriculum, resulting in students' cognitive, knowledge, and ability structures being incomplete. According to Nussbaum's theory, it is critical for society to provide people with competencies. People, on the other hand, should not be forced to learn specific skills.

Nussbaum's theory is not without flaws. Nussbaum's theory is not one of explanation. It only offers a basic framework for evaluation and does not explain the overall impact on society.

### **5.3. Argumentation and comparison of the two theories**

Both Bourdieu's and Nussbaum's theories can explain the reason why the exam-oriented education model has increased educational inequity or inequality in the Chinese educational environment. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and social reproduction seems to have more explanatory power for understanding the impact of exam-oriented education in China, so even though Nussbaum is more of an assessment tool [15].

Overall, Nussbaum's competency approach provides more explanatory power to the problem. Nussbaum's theory provides a more comprehensive perspective on the issue. Bourdieu's theory

merely explains, from a capital standpoint, that a student's academic performance is caused by various capitals and that academic performance alone cannot be used to determine whether the student has the capacity to develop. Because even though capital theory should be interpreted objectively, exam-based education only assesses a student's individual ability and future potential through academic performance, without identifying the other influences at the assignment. This would exacerbate educational inequality and inequity.

In terms of function and ability, Nussbaum's theory can help to explain this situation. Nussbaum's capability theory focuses on human initiative, which is inherently subjective. People have the ability to perform functions, and they cannot be classified into specific functions. Students are deprived of this initiative in a test-based education. Students are always compelled to attend school and may not achieve satisfactory academic results. As a result, the concepts of function and ability can provide more explanatory power to this question.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper examines the theme of teaching through the lenses of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and the role of education in social reproduction, as well as Nussbaum's theory of competence. Through comparison and discussion, it is possible to conclude that both Bourdieu's and Nussbaum's theories have advantages and disadvantages. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction establishes a relatively egalitarian system of basic education that realizes the full potential of the individual. However, it ignores social mobility and does not take into account human initiative. As a result, exam-oriented education undermines the scientific integrity of the curriculum structure of primary and secondary schools, resulting in a cognitive, knowledge and competence structure that is incomplete and seriously disordered. On the contrary, Nussbaum's competency approach theory is more human-centered, explaining test-based education in terms of freedom and choice. The theory emphasizes the importance of society providing people with competencies rather than being forced to acquire certain functions. However, Nussbaum's competency theory is not an explanatory theory, but more of an assessment tool. Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory only objectively examines the fact that a student's academic performance is the result of different capital, but that academic performance alone cannot be used to determine whether a student has the capacity to develop. Therefore, the ability approach theory provides a more comprehensive understanding of the inequities that students face in China's test-based education system. The cultural reproduction theory neglects social mobility, as people are subjective, so Nussbaum's ability approach theory can provide more explanatory power to this issue.

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