

The Role of Cultural Capital in Physical Education: A Study on Strategies for Social Reproduction and Educational Inequality

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Abstract: Using the literature review method and applying Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, this study explores the role of cultural capital in physical education and how it influences social reproduction and educational inequality. To address the inequality in physical education, the study proposes strategies in two areas: promoting educational equity and cultivating cultural capital. Strategies to promote educational equity include showcasing multiculturalism, strengthening teachers' cultural sensitivity training, encouraging student participation in the design and organization of physical activities, and enhancing school-community cooperation. Strategies to cultivate cultural capital include integrating local and global cultures into physical education curricula, incorporating sports history and culture into teaching, promoting cross-cultural sports exchanges and interdisciplinary integration, and strengthening teacher training in cultural education.

Keywords: cultural capital, physical education, social reproduction, educational inequality, physical education reform

Introduction

As a widespread cultural and social phenomenon, sports have long been regarded as an important means of fostering teamwork, enhancing physical health, and improving national quality. However, over time, the vigorous promotion of physical education has become a key focus of development in many countries. Despite this, many students' physical fitness does not seem to have improved significantly. According to the Fifth National Physical Fitness Monitoring Bulletin, the rates of overweight and obesity among adults and the elderly in China have continued to rise since 2014^[1]. More concerning is that many students, after entering society, gradually lose interest and enthusiasm for sports, lacking a strong awareness of lifelong physical activity, and fail to develop healthy living habits. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in China, where, despite ongoing reforms in physical education, students' physical fitness continues to decline^[2]. This raises a crucial question: why, in the context of such a strong emphasis on physical education, do students' physical fitness and attitudes toward sports still fail to improve significantly? Are there certain deeper social and cultural factors that lead to a discrepancy between the goals and actual outcomes of physical education? Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides a valuable analytical tool for this issue^[3]. He argues that education is not only the transmission of knowledge and skills but also the reproduction of cultural and social capital. In the field of physical education, this may mean that certain inherent cultural and social values are continuously reinforced, while other potentially more critical values are overlooked. This paper aims to explore, from the perspective of cultural capital theory, the phenomenon of social reproduction in physical education and how this phenomenon influences educational inequality. Based on this analysis, the paper will further propose strategic solutions to address these challenges.

1. The theory of cultural capital

The theory of cultural capital, proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, serves as a key framework for understanding social inequality and educational reproduction^[4]. He distinguishes between economic, social, and cultural capital, with cultural capital being particularly significant as it represents the cultural resources acquired by individuals or families through education and socialization^[3]. Bourdieu further divides cultural capital into three forms: embodied state (e.g., knowledge, skills), objectified state (e.g., books, artworks), and institutionalized state (e.g., degrees, certificates)^[5]. The reproduction of these forms of capital within the education system helps maintain the social class structure, particularly benefiting those groups that already possess abundant cultural capital.

Since Bourdieu's original conception, the theory of cultural capital has been widely applied and expanded. Research has shown that cultural capital is closely linked to educational achievement and influences individual social mobility^[6-7]. Moreover, cultural capital can be converted into economic and social capital^[8], and in the context of globalization, it exhibits characteristics of cross-cultural mobility^[9]. These subsequent developments have enriched the understanding of cultural capital, especially in studies of educational inequality and social mobility.

2. Physical education and social reproduction

The marginalization of physical education within the education system reflects issues of disciplinary inequality and social reproduction. Although physical education plays an important role in students' physical health, teamwork, and leadership, it is often perceived as a secondary subject by the public and educational decision-makers, failing to align with high cultural capital, which affects students' social mobility^[3,10]. The marginalization of physical education is not only an issue of resource allocation but also involves the reproduction of social values, reflecting the neglect of the value of sports and physical health^[11].

Furthermore, physical education also reproduces class and power relations. Different social classes tend to favor different types of physical activities, with higher social classes favoring activities that require higher financial investment, such as golf and tennis^[12]. This exacerbates class differences. In terms of resource allocation, more powerful groups in society can secure more sports resources for their children, further deepening educational inequality^[13]. At the same time, physical education plays a role in the formation of student identity. Through participation in sports activities, students may form identities linked to specific social classes, thereby reinforcing social class reproduction^[14].

3. Manifestations of cultural capital in physical education

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides a framework for understanding inequality in education. In the context of physical education, cultural capital primarily manifests in three forms: embodied (individual knowledge and skills), objectified (e.g., books, artworks), and institutionalized (e.g., attitudes, values)^[3]. These forms influence students' experiences and achievements in physical education in the form of sports skills, knowledge, attitudes, and social networks.

Cultural capital is closely linked to social class, with families from higher social classes typically possessing more cultural capital, giving their children an advantage in physical education, reflected in their attitudes, skills, and social networks related to sports. These advantages are evident in students' motivation and achievements in physical education^[15]. Students from families with abundant cultural capital are more likely to master physical skills, as they have been exposed to relevant cultural influences at home^[16].

Physical education not only teaches skills but also transmits the culture, history, and values related to sports, thereby enhancing students' cultural capital^[17]. Moreover, cultural capital also influences the content and form of physical education. Students from high cultural capital backgrounds may participate in more valuable or prestigious sports programs, leading to unequal educational opportunities.

4. Physical education strategies and social inequality

Strategies in physical education can be categorized into reproduction strategies, resistance strategies, and adaptation strategies, each of which has a different impact on social inequality. Reproduction strategies aim to maintain the existing social structure and inequality, often by emphasizing traditional sports activities associated with specific social classes,

reinforcing gender, racial, and class stereotypes, and thus deepening social divisions^[22]. On the other hand, resistance strategies seek to challenge and change these structures by encouraging participation in non-traditional sports activities, breaking gender, racial, and class biases, and promoting a more equal and inclusive sports culture^[23]. Adaptation strategies help students adjust to the existing social structure by guiding them to present themselves in ways that gain social recognition in sports settings. Although this does not directly challenge inequality^[24], in the long run, it may exacerbate certain inequalities. These three strategies provide a framework for understanding how physical education either reproduces, resists, or adapts to social inequality, with their effectiveness depending on the broader social and cultural context.

5. Interaction between cultural capital and physical education

5.1 Manifestation of cultural capital in physical education

The transmission and reproduction of cultural capital in physical education involve multiple interactions between family, school, and society. Bourdieu proposed three forms of cultural capital: embodied (e.g., skills and knowledge), objectified (e.g., material resources), and institutionalized (e.g., attitudes and habits)^[3], all of which are reflected in physical education. Families influence children's sports participation and attitudes through parents' sports background and socio-economic status^[6]; schools impact students' sports skills, values, and attitudes through physical education curricula, extracurricular activities, and evaluation mechanisms^[10]; the socio-cultural environment influences individual and family choices in sports through the value ascribed to different sports^[21].

Cultural capital is closely linked to sports achievement. The cultural capital of a family, such as parents' interests, attitudes, and socio-economic status, determines the types of sports projects a child can access and participate in, thereby affecting their sports performance. The quality of school physical education (e.g., teacher background, teaching methods, and resources) also significantly influences students' sports achievements. Furthermore, the socio-cultural environment's values toward sports influence individual and family choices, further impacting students' sports outcomes^[21]. In summary, the accumulation and transmission of cultural capital directly affect students' performance, skills, and values in physical education.

5.2 Physical education and social structure

The relationship between physical education and social class is complex, involving the distribution of educational resources, access to opportunities, and the maintenance of social status. Bourdieu pointed out that physical education not only reflects social class differences but may also exacerbate these disparities. Students from higher social classes typically have more resources and opportunities (e.g., high-level programs, professional training, quality facilities), which enhance their sports achievements and social status. In contrast, students from lower social classes face more challenges (e.g., lack of equipment and training), which may lead to marginalization^[10]. Furthermore, certain sports are viewed as symbols of the upper class, while others are associated with lower social classes, further consolidating the social class structure^[21].

Physical education is closely tied to power structures, with education serving as a tool of power to transmit the values and cultural capital of the ruling class, maintaining their dominant position^[22]. Certain sports, such as golf and tennis, are closely linked to the status of the upper class, while football and athletics are associated with lower social status. By controlling educational resources and opportunities, the ruling class maintains its cultural capital and social standing^[14]. However, physical education can also serve as a tool of resistance, as marginalized groups can gain cultural and social capital through sports, challenging and transforming the existing power structure^[23].

6. Insights from cultural capital theory for physical education

Cultural capital theory provides a new perspective for physical education, emphasizing the influence of cultural elements on students' identity, achievements, and social status. In physical education, the integration of cultural capital means incorporating cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment, thereby enhancing the quality and effectiveness of education^[15]. Firstly, specific physical education courses can be designed based on students' cultural backgrounds to increase engagement and interest. Secondly, fostering students' cultural awareness and critical

thinking enhances their understanding of cultural capital^[24]. Finally, assessing students' cultural capital helps to develop more effective educational strategies.

From the perspective of cultural capital, physical education should focus on the cultivation of cultural capital to address the issues of social reproduction and inequality in education. The content of physical education should be diversified to reflect different cultural backgrounds, enhancing students' cultural awareness and critical thinking. Teaching methods should emphasize student agency and participation, fostering critical thinking and social responsibility. Physical education assessment should also focus on the cultivation and transmission of cultural capital. In conclusion, the cultural capital perspective provides a new path for reforming physical education, improving educational quality while addressing social inequality.

7. Development strategies for physical education

7.1 Strategies for promoting educational equity

Physical education courses should reflect cultural and social diversity by integrating sports from different cultural backgrounds to ensure that each student's cultural identity is represented, thereby increasing engagement and promoting educational equity. Teachers should receive cultural sensitivity training to enhance their cross-cultural communication skills and create an inclusive learning environment, ensuring that students' needs are respected and advancing educational equity. Encouraging students to participate in the design and organization of physical activities and collaborating with the community can improve critical thinking and social responsibility, reflecting community needs and providing students with rich learning opportunities. Establishing an evaluation system that focuses on the development of students' cultural capital, assessing not only their sports skills but also their cultural capital growth, can optimize teaching methods and promote educational equity.

7.2 Strategies for cultivating cultural capital

Physical education curricula should integrate local culture with global sports trends to deepen students' understanding and appreciation of sports culture, thus promoting the accumulation of cultural capital. Incorporating sports history and cultural content into teaching helps students understand the social context of sports, increases awareness of the diversity of sports culture, and nurtures cultural capital. Through collaboration with international schools and interdisciplinary integration (e.g., combining sports with arts and literature), students can gain opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, facilitating the comprehensive accumulation of cultural capital. Strengthening the cultural education training for physical education teachers can improve their ability to incorporate cultural capital into teaching, further advancing the cultivation of students' cultural capital.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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