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Symbolic Power and Social Reproduction in Education: Pierre Bourdieu's Perspective

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between symbolic power and social reproduction in education through the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu. It aims to uncover how the education system, presented as neutral within the discourse of meritocracy, interacts with the social structure, particularly through the distribution and legitimation of cultural capital. The study discusses Bourdieu's key concepts such as habitus, cultural capital, field, and symbolic power and demonstrates their analytical value in explaining how social inequalities are reproduced within educational institutions. Although the education system is formally grounded in the principle of equal opportunity, it often treats the cultural capital of dominant social groups as a universal standard. Through symbolic power, social differences are legitimized and reproduced in subtle ways. Furthermore, under conditions of globalization and neoliberalization, mechanisms such as standardized assessments, performance indicators, and rankings appear objective but frequently advantage culturally privileged groups. The education system is therefore understood as a paradoxical institution that simultaneously enables social mobility and maintains existing social hierarchies.

Keywords: *education, symbolic power, social reproduction, cultural capital, habitus, Pierre Bourdieu*

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Təhsildə simvolik güc və sosial reproduksiya: Pierre Bourdieu perspektivi

Xülasə

Bu məqalədə təhsil sahəsində simvolik güc və sosial reproduksiya münasibətləri Pierre Bourdieu-nun yanaşması əsasında təhlil edilmişdir. Tədqiqatın məqsədi meritokratiya diskursu çərçivəsində neytral təqdim olunan təhsil sisteminin sosial strukturlarla qarşılıqlı əlaqəsini, xüsusilə mədəni kapitalın paylanması və legitimləşdirilməsi mexanizmlərini üzə çıxarmaqdır. Məqalədə Bourdieu-nun habitus, mədəni kapital, sahə və simvolik güc anlayışları qarşılıqlı əlaqədə izah edilmiş və bu anlayışların təhsil sistemində sosial bərabərsizliyin necə təkrar istehsal olunduğunu anlamaq baxımından analitik potensialı göstərilmişdir.

Təhsil sistemi formal olaraq bərabər imkanlar prinsipi üzərində qurulsa da, praktikada dominant sosial qrupların mədəni kapitalını universal norma kimi təqdim edir. Bu proses simvolik güc vasitəsilə həyata keçirilir və sosial fərqlər legitimləşdirilmiş formada yenidən istehsal olunur. Məqalədə qloballaşma və neoliberallaşma şəraitində təhsil mühitində baş verən dəyişikliklər təhlil olunmuşdur. Standartlaşdırılmış qiymətləndirmə, performans göstəriciləri və reytinglər obyektiv görünməyə də, bəzən mədəni üstünlüyə malik qrupların xeyrinə işlədiyi görülmüşdür. Təhsil sistemi həm sosial mobillik yaradan, həm də mövcud sosial iyerarxiyanı qoruyan paradoksal institut kimi qiymətləndirilir.

Açar sözlər: təhsil, simvolik güc, sosial reproduksiya, mədəni kapital, habitus, Pierre Bourdieu

Introduction

The education system is presented in modern societies as the primary mechanism of social mobility. Within liberal-democratic discourse, it is characterized as an institution that creates equal opportunities and promotes individual achievement. Based on the principle of meritocracy, academic success is explained through individual effort and talent, while education is portrayed as a system grounded in objective and neutral criteria. However, the sociology of education demonstrates that this approach carries a normative character and does not fully reflect empirical reality (Nash, 1990). Education is not merely an institution that transmits knowledge, but also a field in which social structures and power relations are reproduced. The structural-functionalist perspective interprets education as a rational mechanism of social integration and role allocation, emphasizing that individuals are selected according to their abilities. Yet this approach obscures the influence of social origin and cultural resources on academic outcomes and renders structural factors invisible under a discourse of individual responsibility (Valle, 2022).

Research

In this context, Pierre Bourdieu's theory holds particular significance. He describes education as a "field" possessing relative autonomy and demonstrates that various forms of capital struggle within it. Although the school system is formally based on universal criteria, in practice it presents the cultural capital of dominant groups as the legitimate norm. Certain linguistic styles, aesthetic preferences, and behavioral codes are transformed into the criteria of "educational success" (Ramsey, 2025). Bourdieu's concepts of "habitus," "cultural capital," "field," and "symbolic power" explain this process. Habitus, formed within the family, determines the individual's adaptation to educational demands, while the cultural capital of dominant groups is more readily recognized and rewarded. Through symbolic power, particular forms of knowledge and cultural codes are presented as "objective" and "universal." As a result, social differences are perceived as differences in individual ability, and structural inequalities are legitimized. Thus, education simultaneously creates opportunities for social mobility and ensures the continuity of the social structure.

Pierre Bourdieu's Theoretical Framework: Core Concepts

Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes society not as a set of fixed categories but as a dynamic structure shaped by the distribution of different forms of capital and the struggles surrounding them. His framework, centered on habitus, cultural capital, field, and symbolic power, explains how social practices are produced and reproduced (Grenfell, 2014). In the sphere of education, this perspective reveals how inequality is reproduced through legitimate mechanisms. Habitus, formed through socialization, consists of durable dispositions that both reflect social structure and guide action. Because the habitus of dominant groups aligns more closely with institutional expectations, academic success is frequently interpreted as natural talent (Reay, 2004).

The concept of cultural capital is one of Bourdieu's central contributions to the sociology of education. He expands the notion of capital beyond economic resources to include knowledge, linguistic competence, aesthetic taste, and behavioral codes that generate social advantage. Cultural capital appears in embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms, with the latter especially significant in education, where diplomas formalize social differences and function as symbolic indicators of social position (Thomson, 2008). The concept of field underpins Bourdieu's structural

analysis. A field is a relatively autonomous social space in which actors compete for positions based on different forms of capital. In the educational field, cultural capital is primary, and academic success, prestige, and credentials operate as resources that secure position (Baylarov, 2024, p. 137).

The concept of field demonstrates that the education system is not merely an institution that transmits knowledge, but also a space of struggle in which social positions are distributed and legitimized. Participants occupying dominant positions seek to preserve existing rules and present them as universal norms, thereby ensuring the continuity of the reproductive mechanism (Swartz, 2013).

Symbolic power explains the mechanism of legitimacy within this structure. Symbolic power is the capacity to exert influence without the use of physical force, operating through recognition and accepted norms. Its effectiveness lies precisely in the fact that it is not perceived as coercion. By presenting certain forms of knowledge as “scientific,” “objective,” and “high-quality,” the education system elevates them to the status of universal and neutral norms. Alternative forms of knowledge and cultural experiences are often pushed to the periphery or evaluated as illegitimate. This process occurs through “symbolic violence”: the cultural values of dominant groups are imposed as universally valid norms, and groups in subordinate positions also come to perceive them as natural. As a result, social differences are understood as differences in individual ability, and structural inequalities become invisible (Lingard, Rawolle, & Taylor, 2005). Thus, habitus determines the orientation of individual behavior within the field; the field determines the value of capital; cultural capital secures position within the field; and symbolic power ensures the legitimacy of these positions. This interrelation forms the mechanism of social reproduction within the education system and reveals the structural-cultural mechanisms underlying the discourse of equal opportunity. Bourdieu’s theoretical framework enables us to understand education not as a functional and neutral institution, but as a space of capital conversion, positional struggle, and the production of legitimacy (Karademir & Kaya, 2020).

The Education System, Social Reproduction, and the Transformation of Symbolic Power in the Contemporary Context

According to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory, although the education system is formally grounded in meritocratic principles, in practice it serves as a key institution for the reproduction of social structure. The discourse of meritocracy links academic success to individual ability and effort, yet it downplays the influence of social origin and cultural resources. Bourdieu’s model of social reproduction argues that education does not eliminate social differences; rather, it reproduces them in legitimized and institutionalized forms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Children from middle and upper class families possess richer cultural capital and a habitus that is more closely aligned with school expectations. This alignment with dominant linguistic codes, cognitive styles, and forms of self expression contributes to higher academic evaluations, and such success is often interpreted as a reflection of personal talent. In reality, however, these achievements are largely grounded in inherited cultural advantages.

By presenting dominant cultural codes as universal norms, the education system either renders the cultural resources of other social groups invisible or evaluates them as “deficiencies.” The academic difficulties of a student from a lower social stratum may be interpreted as a problem of individual ability; however, the issue often stems from structural misalignment - that is, from the discrepancy between habitus and the expectations of the educational field. This mechanism operates through symbolic power: the cultural forms of socially dominant groups are imposed as objective and neutral criteria. As a result, social inequalities are legitimized, while structural determinants become obscured under a discourse of individual responsibility (Bourdieu, 1991). Under contemporary conditions of globalization and neoliberalization, social reproduction in education manifests itself in new institutional forms. The system is increasingly evaluated through competition, performance, and measurable outcomes; standardized examinations, international programs, and rankings are presented as objective criteria. However, these indicators often privilege specific forms of cultural capital, functioning in favor of resource-endowed groups and reproducing symbolic power through new discourses (Orujov, 2025). “Quality education” is measured according to market logic, while ranking

and brand value are transformed into indicators of social status. Academic language, moreover, assumes a selective character, pushing alternative forms of knowledge to the periphery (Bourdieu, 2015).

Within the neoliberal model of governance, the ideology of individual responsibility and self-optimization is strengthened; academic success and failure are increasingly explained through individual performance. This approach conceals inequalities produced by social structure by presenting them as matters of personal choice and effort, thereby intensifying the effect of symbolic power. Although the education system is portrayed as an objective and neutral mechanism, the unequal distribution of capital remains unchanged. Education thus possesses a paradoxical character: on the one hand, it creates opportunities for social mobility; on the other hand, through the selective recognition of cultural capital, it reproduces existing hierarchies. The strengthening of the discourse of competition and performance renders these reproductive mechanisms more legitimate and subtle (Reay, 2004).

Conclusion

The theoretical analysis conducted demonstrates that the education system is not merely an institution that transmits knowledge and provides professional training, but also an important social field in which social structures and power relations are reproduced. Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework makes it possible to question normative assumptions about the neutrality and objectivity of education and to reveal the structural-cultural mechanisms underlying academic success. The interaction between the concepts of habitus, cultural capital, and field shows that academic performance is not only the result of individual characteristics, but also the product of social origin and the unequal distribution of capital. The mechanism of symbolic power, in turn, presents this inequality as natural and legitimate, thereby ensuring its continuity. Thus, social differences are reinforced not through overt coercion, but through mechanisms of recognition and acceptance. Under conditions of contemporary global and neoliberal transformations, these reproductive mechanisms persist in more subtle and institutionalized forms. A governance model based on competition, performance, and measurable outcomes obscures the role of structural factors while strengthening the discourse of individual responsibility. This further deepens the effect of symbolic power. It is therefore necessary that educational policy and institutional reforms not be limited solely to structural changes, but also take into account the unequal distribution of cultural capital and the symbolic mechanisms that produce legitimacy. Otherwise, even if the formal principle of equality is preserved within the education system, the mechanism of social reproduction will persist, and inequalities will continue to be reproduced in new forms.

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