



Cultural Reproduction in Teachers' Pedagogical Practices: A Bourdieusian Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Teaching processes within the educational field are often regarded as neutral mechanisms for the transmission of knowledge. However, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction challenges this assumption by demonstrating that education is far from a simple conduit of knowledge; rather, it functions as a central mechanism through which social hierarchies and cultural inequalities are continuously reproduced. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction provides a powerful analytical lens for understanding how inequality is subtly maintained through everyday educational practices. Rather than viewing schools as neutral sites of knowledge transmission, Bourdieu conceptualizes education as a social field in which dominant cultural norms are legitimized and reproduced through pedagogical processes. Teachers, often unintentionally, play a central role in this process through their teaching practices, expectations, and evaluative judgments. Accordingly, this article draws on Bourdieu's framework to analyze cultural reproduction embedded in pedagogical practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of education, schooling is highly susceptible to becoming a site where multiple power relations intersect and compete. From the perspective of cultural reproduction theory, education is not a neutral mechanism for knowledge transmission but a key carrier through which power relations are embedded, enacted, and legitimized. Cultural reproduction theory posits that dominant social groups are able to transmit their values, norms, and modes of perception through educational processes, thereby shaping learners' dispositions and orientations in ways that align with the habitus of the dominant class. Bourdieu's conceptual triad of habitus, capital, and field provides a systematic framework for understanding how this process unfolds within schooling. Habitus refers to the durable and transposable dispositions that individuals acquire through socialization within particular familial and social conditions. These dispositions shape how learners perceive, interpret, and respond to educational expectations. Capital—including cultural, social, and economic forms—denotes the unequal distribution of resources that are differentially recognized and valued within educational institutions. The field of education, as a structured social space governed by its own rules and hierarchies, privileges certain forms of habitus and capital while marginalizing others. Within this framework, schooling operates as a field in which students from dominant social backgrounds possess habitus and cultural capital that more closely correspond to institutional norms, pedagogical styles, and evaluative criteria. As a result, their ways of speaking, thinking, and behaving are more readily recognized as legitimate and competent. Conversely, students from subordinate or marginalized backgrounds may experience misrecognition, as their dispositions and cultural resources are less aligned with dominant educational expectations. These mismatches are frequently interpreted as individual deficiencies—such as lack of ability or motivation—rather than as outcomes of structural inequality (Archer, 1993; Bernstein, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Teachers occupy a pivotal intermediary position in this process. Situated within the educational field, teachers often function—consciously or unconsciously—as agents of cultural reproduction. Through curriculum selection, instructional practices, assessment standards, and everyday interactions, teachers mediate the transmission of dominant cultural norms and values. In doing so, they may inadvertently reinforce existing power relations by legitimizing specific forms of knowledge, language use, and modes of participation that reflect the habitus of dominant social groups. Consequently, teachers risk becoming instruments through which social inequalities are reproduced, thereby obscuring the pursuit of educational justice and undermining the ideal of equal educational opportunity. Understanding teaching and

learning through Bourdieu's theoretical lens thus reveals how seemingly neutral pedagogical processes are deeply embedded within broader social structures. It highlights the need for critical reflection on how educational practices valorize particular forms of habitus and capital, and how alternative pedagogical approaches might disrupt rather than reproduce entrenched social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1998).

In sum, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction provides a powerful analytical lens for understanding how inequality is subtly maintained through everyday educational practices. Rather than viewing schools as neutral sites of knowledge transmission, Bourdieu conceptualizes education as a social field in which dominant cultural norms are legitimized and reproduced through pedagogical processes. Teachers, often unintentionally, play a central role in this process through their teaching practices, expectations, and evaluative judgments. Accordingly, this article draws on Bourdieu's framework to analyze cultural reproduction embedded in pedagogical practices.

2. AN EXAMINATION OF REPRODUCTION THEORY

The “cultural reproduction model” represents one of the central strands within reproduction theory. Accordingly, a discussion of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction must begin with a brief examination of the origins and conceptual foundations of reproduction theory, as this broader theoretical context allows for a more nuanced understanding of Bourdieu's core arguments. Reproduction theory emerged primarily during the 1960s and 1970s in response to the failure of European secondary education systems to realize the ideal of social justice. Prior to the development of this perspective, the academic underachievement of children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds was typically explained through individualistic accounts, such as differences in intelligence, linguistic ability, or learning motivation. As a result, scholarly attention was largely directed toward students' personal characteristics rather than toward the institutional structures and pedagogical practices of schooling. With the rise of reproduction theory, however, analytical focus shifted toward the relational and structural dimensions of education, including pedagogical interactions, language use, and the differential status and resources embedded within family backgrounds. This shift laid the groundwork for Bourdieu's later theoretical contributions by foregrounding how educational practices are embedded within social structures. Within this framework, habitus can be understood as the internalized dispositions shaped by one's social and familial conditions; capital refers to the unequal distribution of economic, cultural, and social resources that schools implicitly recognize and reward; and field denotes the structured social space of education in which these dispositions and resources are differentially valued. Together, these concepts provide a coherent explanatory framework for understanding how educational systems contribute to the reproduction of social inequality through seemingly neutral pedagogical processes (Teese, 1997). Second, with regard to the conceptual foundations of reproduction theory, its earliest formulations can be traced back to the works of French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in the 1960s. Both Bourdieu and Passeron argued that the most significant factor shaping individuals' class positions lies in cultural differences. Family educational attitudes, values, and lived experiences, for instance, play a crucial role in influencing children's success or failure within school settings. In Bourdieu's scholarship, extensive attention is devoted to examining how schools function as sites for the reproduction of social and cultural inequalities. His early works, in particular, focus on how strategies of reproduction are designed and enacted through everyday school practices (Harker, 2000; Teese, 1997). These analyses reveal Bourdieu's deep concern with the mechanisms through which educational practices contribute to cultural reproduction. Such concerns later crystallized into his theoretical framework encompassing the interrelated concepts of habitus, capital, and field, through which educational institutions are understood as structured social spaces that privilege certain cultural dispositions and resources while marginalizing others. From this perspective, schooling does not merely transmit neutral knowledge but actively legitimizes dominant cultural capital, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies.

3. CORE PERSPECTIVES OF PIERRE BOURDIEU'S THEORY OF CULTURAL REPRODUCTION AND THE PHENOMENON OF CULTURAL REPRODUCTION IN TEACHING PROCESSES

In the teaching process, interactions unfold among three key dimensions: teachers, students, and learning content. That is, teachers seek to guide students toward mastering what is deemed worth learning. However, whether unjust forms of cultural reproduction emerge during this process—while teachers intend to facilitate students' learning of curricular content—is an issue that warrants careful scrutiny. After all, education is often prone to becoming a non-neutral enterprise, and educational practitioners themselves frequently function as non-neutral actors within it. Moreover, within educational fields characterized by struggles over power, those who possess greater economic and social capital—namely the affluent and dominant classes—tend to occupy advantageous positions. Accordingly, the teaching process is highly susceptible to the emergence of cultural reproduction. Teachers therefore ought to cultivate critical rationality and reflexivity, so as not to unwittingly become non-neutral agents who facilitate cultural reproduction. Furthermore, the school as an educational institution can be understood as a site in which diverse interests compete. Nevertheless, from a normative standpoint, schools should not be arenas for power struggles, nor should they align themselves solely with the interests of dominant social groups, thereby degenerating into instruments of cultural reproduction. Under such circumstances, the formal curriculum of schooling often becomes a tool for disciplining and domesticating students rather than emancipating them (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1991; Marshall, 1996; Shor & Freire, 1987; Ye & Shih, 2021). This article focuses on the

core dimensions of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction—namely habitus, cultural capital, symbolic violence, and field—and critically examines how processes of cultural reproduction are embedded and enacted within pedagogical practices.

3.1 Habitus

The concept of "habitus" refers to a structured system of dispositions that predisposes social actors to perceive, think, and act in relatively stable and patterned ways. More precisely, habitus denotes the embodied dispositions of thought and action that individuals acquire through their membership in particular social groups or social classes. It represents an inseparable configuration of mental and behavioral orientations that actors typically experience as self-evident or taken for granted. In this sense, individuals' lived experiences are themselves structured by habitus, insofar as these experiences are delimited and organized by the internalized system of dispositions. As a generative principle, habitus functions as a schema of perception, appreciation, and action from which practices emerge. It inclines individuals toward certain ways of interpreting the social world and responding to it, thereby producing practices that appear natural or commonsensical rather than socially conditioned. Importantly, habitus is historically constituted: it is formed under specific socio-historical conditions through the largely unconscious internalization of objective social structures. Among the most significant sites of this internalization is the education system, which plays a central role in shaping individuals' consciousness and symbolically structuring their modes of perception and action within a given society. From this perspective, habitus can also be understood as the shared outcome of individuals who occupy similar positions within the social space and who, through comparable socialization processes, internalize analogous structural constraints and opportunities. Such internalized structures guide not only cognition but also affect and practical action in particular contexts. Moreover, habitus is always expressed within social space, which simultaneously constitutes a social field characterized by power relations. Within this field, social positions are differentiated according to the distribution of capital, and power operates through the capacity of dominant groups to define legitimate forms of knowledge, conduct, and value (Bourdieu, 1991; Cuff, Sharrock, & Francis, 1998; Lechte, 1994; Turner, 1999). Bourdieu further argues that schools tend to universalize the habitus of dominant groups by treating it as the only legitimate or appropriate form of cultural disposition, against which all students are measured. Given that teachers are often positioned within the middle class, they may—frequently without reflexive awareness—privilege their own habitus as normative in pedagogical expectations, evaluative judgments, and classroom interactions. Consequently, the teaching process becomes a key site for cultural reproduction, wherein students are implicitly encouraged or compelled to align their dispositions with those of the dominant social groups. It is in this sense that Bourdieu contends that habitus is not merely reproduced but can be cumulatively reinforced through the operations of the education system itself (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Harker, 2000).

3.2 Cultural Capital

With regard to cultural capital, Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes this notion as existing in three distinct states: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state. Taken together, these three states illuminate a continuous process of class reproduction that extends from family-based socialization to formal schooling. Moreover, the concepts of embodied and objectified cultural capital suggest that factors shaping inequality of educational opportunity cannot be reduced solely to economic conditions; rather, cultural dimensions constitute a more decisive and enduring determinant. Bourdieu argues that the culture of dominant groups exerts control over the economic, social, and political resources embedded within schooling, and that these resources subsequently serve as strategic assets through which dominant groups design and sustain mechanisms of reproduction. He therefore calls for cultural capital to be understood in a manner analogous to economic capital. Just as dominant economic systems tend to advantage those who possess economic capital, educational systems likewise tend to privilege individuals who possess culturally valued capital. In this sense, schooling operates as an institutional structure that systematically rewards particular cultural dispositions and competencies. Regarding the relationship between cultural capital and habitus, Bourdieu emphasizes that the habitus of dominant groups is transformed into forms of cultural capital that schools treat as natural, legitimate, and self-evident. These culturally sanctioned forms are regarded as the most effective means through which class-based social reproduction is achieved, with teachers frequently positioned—often unintentionally—as facilitators of this process. Individuals who possess the cultural capital recognized by schools thus enjoy increased chances of academic success, whereas those who lack such capital face diminished opportunities for achievement. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as the linguistic and cultural competencies inherited by individuals from the class positions occupied by their families. These competencies include the meanings, lifestyles, modes of thinking, and dispositions transmitted through family socialization. The cultural capital held by dominant classes constitutes a primary reason why they are able to benefit disproportionately from educational systems. When teachers perceive classroom interaction merely as a neutral communicative process and fail to recognize the influence of cultural capital on teaching and learning, they risk enabling dominant groups to repeatedly secure advantages within educational processes, thereby becoming agents of cultural reproduction. In a public dialogue, Bourdieu further reiterated that language, culture, and education function as instruments through which existing social relations are reproduced. Differences between languages, in particular, represent manifestations of power relations rather than neutral variations. Since his fieldwork in Algeria during the 1960s, Bourdieu consistently devoted his scholarship to exposing the modes of class domination embedded within education, art, and other cultural domains in capitalist societies. A central claim maintained throughout Bourdieu's work is that domination in capitalist societies does not operate through overt coercion or explicit imposition. Nor is it enacted through deliberate conspiratorial manipulation by elites acting consciously in pursuit of self-interest.

Rather, domination persists because ruling classes are the primary beneficiaries of economic, social, and symbolic power. This power is embodied in both economic and cultural capital, embedded within social institutions and everyday practices, and continuously reproduced through these structures and routines (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Harker, 2000; Lechte, 1994; Wacquant, 1989). From this perspective, cultural capital constitutes a core mechanism of cultural reproduction in Bourdieu's theory. Educational systems—and teachers' pedagogical practices in particular—tend to advantage those who already possess culturally valued capital, thereby contributing to the ongoing reproduction of social inequality.

3.3 Symbolic Violence

Pierre Bourdieu undertakes a meticulous, layered analysis of pedagogic action, gradually uncovering its underlying logic and power relations. At the most fundamental level, Bourdieu argues that all pedagogic action constitutes a form of symbolic violence. This violence operates through arbitrary power, whereby cultural arbitrariness is imposed and legitimated as natural or necessary. In other words, symbolic violence functions by inculcating a compulsory culture through arbitrary authority, and its effectiveness lies precisely in its capacity to regulate and shape individuals' consciousness and will. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is intended to expose the underlying nature of educational action. From his perspective, any imposition of cultural arbitrariness through authoritative power objectively constitutes symbolic violence. Because the transmission of a compulsory culture necessarily relies on pedagogic communication, teaching communication itself is inherently a process of coercive cultural transmission. Pedagogic action, therefore, may be understood as a communicative process in which arbitrary cultural meanings are conveyed and internalized. It is within this pedagogic communication that cultural reproduction frequently takes place, as dominant cultural forms are imposed and normalized through seemingly legitimate educational practices. More broadly, symbolic violence is enacted through power relations among social groups and classes. Dominant groups and upper classes mobilize their accumulated social, cultural, and institutional power to impose their cultural norms as universally valid. Importantly, symbolic violence in pedagogic action does not operate solely through overt or visible forms of coercion. Rather, it often functions in subtle, invisible ways—most notably through ideological control and the shaping of taken-for-granted assumptions. In this sense, symbolic violence manifests in both explicit and implicit forms. While such processes may provoke resistance among students, they nonetheless remain deeply embedded in everyday educational practices. Conceptually, symbolic violence constitutes one of the central analytical pillars of Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction. Bourdieu contends that common understandings of symbolic systems within the social world are often partial and polarized. Some analyses focus narrowly on symbolic forms and meanings while neglecting the power relations that sustain them; others emphasize power structures without adequately accounting for the efficacy of symbolic mechanisms. This bifurcation results in an incomplete understanding of how symbolic systems operate within social life (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Shor & Freire, 1987). Within formal pedagogic communication, such power relations are frequently rendered invisible. Consequently, teaching is commonly perceived as a neutral process of knowledge transmission, when in fact it simultaneously constitutes a process through which power relations are enacted and reproduced. Teachers, often without reflexive awareness, may thus become agents of cultural reproduction, participating in the reinforcement of dominant cultural norms. Under these conditions, education risks functioning primarily in the service of dominant social groups, contributing to the maintenance of existing social positions and material privileges. It is for this reason that the teaching process must be critically examined as a site permeated by cultural reproduction, rather than idealized as a neutral or emancipatory endeavor.

3.4 Field

A field refers to a relatively autonomous social space within which different agents (or institutions) interact, compete, and struggle with one another according to their positions, which are structured by the distribution of various forms of capital, such as cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital. Each field operates according to its own specific logic, rules, and power relations, which exert structural constraints on agents' practices and strategies. Habitus is generated and enacted within particular fields, while fields, through power relations and the distribution of capital, define which forms of culture are recognized as legitimate. In this way, fields function as key mechanisms through which cultural reproduction and symbolic violence are produced and sustained. Within the educational field, schooling constitutes a relatively autonomous social space governed by its own institutional logics, evaluative criteria, and power relations. Teachers, students, curricula, and assessment mechanisms occupy differentiated positions within this field, positions that are structured by the unequal distribution of cultural, social, and symbolic capital. These positions not only shape actors' expectations and strategies but also delimit what counts as legitimate knowledge, appropriate behavior, and valued forms of learning. As a result, teaching is never a neutral pedagogical process but is always embedded in the structured power relations of the educational field. From Bourdieu's perspective, pedagogic action operates as a central mechanism through which the educational field enacts cultural reproduction. Teachers, who are themselves products of the dominant or middle-class habitus, tend to treat their own cultural dispositions, linguistic codes, and modes of reasoning as universal and pedagogically legitimate. When such dispositions are implicitly or explicitly imposed upon all students as the norm, pedagogic action becomes a vehicle for symbolic violence, insofar as it enforces an arbitrary cultural order while masking its arbitrariness. This form of violence is symbolic precisely because it operates through recognition, misrecognition, and consent, rather than through overt coercion. In this sense, symbolic violence within the educational field is exercised through everyday pedagogical practices, including curriculum selection,

classroom interaction, assessment standards, and teacher expectations. These practices function as forms of pedagogic communication that transmit a compulsory culture aligned with the dominant habitus, while simultaneously devaluing or rendering invisible the cultural resources of students from subordinate social groups. Because this process is embedded in the taken-for-granted routines of schooling, both teachers and students may fail to recognize the power relations at work, thereby contributing—often unintentionally—to the reproduction of social inequality. Moreover, the operation of symbolic violence in teaching does not rely solely on visible or explicit forms of domination. Rather, it frequently takes subtle and invisible forms, such as the privileging of particular ways of speaking, thinking, and behaving that appear “natural” or “academic” within the educational field. Through such mechanisms, the school legitimizes the culture of dominant groups as neutral and universal, while positioning alternative cultural expressions as deficient or inappropriate. Consequently, the educational field becomes a key site in which habitus and field intersect, reinforcing cultural reproduction through pedagogic action that is misrecognized as purely educational rather than political (Bourdieu, 1997a, 1997b, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Lechte, 1994).

4. CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

Although Pierre Bourdieu is easily the most important current French sociologist of education, his work has largely been neglected by American educationalists. Part of this is undoubtedly Bourdieu's fault, for his writing is both jargon-ridden and convoluted, but it would be a pity if this stylistic barrier impeded a critical and balanced analysis of his research (Shirley, 1986).

“Educational praxis” is a concept widely discussed in educational theory, philosophy, and critical pedagogy. Real educational praxis must be linked to its social context and to the complexity of its environment. Educational praxis refers to the reflective action in education, where teaching is not just a mechanical delivery of content but a conscious, intentional, and iterative process that connects theory, reflection, and practice. It emphasizes that educators and learners are co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients. “Teaching” is the core of educational practice. Teaching processes within the educational field are often regarded as neutral mechanisms for the transmission of knowledge. However, Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction challenges this assumption by demonstrating that education is far from a simple conduit of knowledge; rather, it functions as a central mechanism through which social hierarchies and cultural inequalities are continuously reproduced. Through the interrelated concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and field, Bourdieu argues that schooling, while ostensibly fair and meritocratic, in fact reinforces the dominance of privileged groups by valorizing particular symbolic forms and evaluative standards. More specifically, cultural reproduction can be clearly observed in curriculum design, pedagogical practices, assessment regimes, and teacher-student interactions. Previous studies have shown that emphases on “standard language,” preferences for abstract and linear modes of reasoning, and implicit reward structures aligned with middle-class cultural tastes collectively contribute to unequal learning conditions. Assessment criteria are often closely aligned with the habitus cultivated within middle-class families, thereby invisibly reproducing existing cultural and class distinctions. As students enter the educational field with unequal volumes and forms of cultural capital, the “seemingly natural” differences that emerge in their learning trajectories are frequently interpreted as differences in ability, rather than as outcomes of broader structural inequalities. Furthermore, teachers' professional judgments and pedagogical styles may inadvertently contribute to processes of cultural reproduction. Research indicates that teachers often expect students to communicate, regulate emotions, and participate in classroom activities in ways that conform to dominant cultural norms (Bourdieu, 1998, 2000; Lareau, 2011; Mills, 2008; Reay, 2004; Shih, 2018a, Shih, 2018b, 2020). When students fail to meet these implicit expectations, they are frequently labeled as “low-achieving” or “unmotivated,” leading educators to misrecognize cultural differences as individual deficiencies and thereby obscuring the structural conditions underlying educational inequality. From a Bourdieusian perspective, reflecting critically on the teaching process requires recognizing that education is not inherently a solution to social inequality, but rather a social institution with the potential to reproduce inequality under existing conditions. When educators become aware of the mechanisms through which cultural reproduction operates, they may adopt more critical and reflective pedagogical strategies. These include valuing diverse forms of cultural capital, recalibrating pedagogical expectations, loosening reliance on singular assessment standards, fostering inclusive learning environments, and reducing symbolic violence through dialogue and mutual understanding. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction thus reminds us that teaching is not merely an act of knowledge transmission, but a form of practice deeply intertwined with power, culture, and social stratification. Only by re-examining the nature and operation of education through critical reflection can education become a force for challenging inequality, rather than merely reproducing existing social hierarchies.

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