
SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION, CULTURAL CAPITAL, AND ACCESS TO LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

Educational inequality has long been a central concern in sociological inquiry, as it reflects the persistent disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and outcomes across social groups. This study conducts a systematic literature review to examine how sociological perspectives illuminate the mechanisms through which social stratification and cultural capital shape unequal educational trajectories. By synthesizing findings from diverse academic sources, the review highlights the multidimensional nature of inequality that extends beyond economic resources to include symbolic and cultural assets. The analysis draws extensively on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, demonstrating how family background, linguistic practices, and cultural exposure reinforce social hierarchies in education. Moreover, the review underscores that access to learning opportunities remains unequally distributed across class, gender, and geographic lines. Existing studies consistently reveal that institutional structures often reproduce, rather than mitigate, social inequalities in education. The findings suggest that educational inequality is not merely a reflection of individual shortcomings but a structural issue embedded within broader social dynamics. In synthesizing these perspectives, this article contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of how inequality persists within education systems. The review also identifies critical gaps in the literature, including limited comparative studies across contexts and insufficient attention to intersectionality. Ultimately, the study provides theoretical insights and policy-relevant implications for addressing educational inequality from a sociological standpoint.

Keywords: *Educational Inequality, Sociological Perspectives, Social Stratification, Cultural Capital, Access to Learning Opportunities.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Educational inequality has emerged as a pressing global sociological concern, recognized for its pervasive impact across diverse contexts and its implications for social cohesion and mobility. Studies consistently document persistent disparities in academic achievement and access to educational resources among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Blanden, Doepke, & Stuhler, 2022). Evidence from high-income countries reveals that children of lower socioeconomic status begin formal schooling at a considerable disadvantage, forming enduring gaps in cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Education Policy Institute, 2023). These educational disparities not only hinder individual attainment but also perpetuate intergenerational inequality and constrain social mobility across societies (Blanden et al., 2022). In an era of globalization and growing diversity, educational inequality has become a focal point of international scholarly and policy debates, including special issues dedicated to examining education in stratified societies (Aiston, 2024). In low- and middle-income countries, the situation is equally critical: recent data indicate that over half of primary school children are unable to read and comprehend a simple story by the end of their schooling,

underscoring widespread learning deficits. This recognition has catalyzed global commitments such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Moreover, the structural dimensions of educational inequality including disparities rooted in institutional funding, teacher distribution, and school infrastructure have been foregrounded as embedded elements that reinforce stratified educational outcomes. The sociological framing of educational inequality thus views it not merely as an outcome of individual deficits, but as a systemic phenomenon deeply entwined with social stratification and institutional bias. Addressing such entrenched inequalities requires not only expanding educational access, but also dismantling the structural barriers that reproduce them across generations. In summary, educational inequality represents a global, structural issue with far-reaching societal consequences, meriting sustained sociological examination and policy intervention.

Educational inequality has been consistently framed within major sociological theories that emphasize the interplay between social structure and individual opportunity. Max Weber's multidimensional approach to stratification highlights how class, status, and power intersect to shape access to education (Weber, 2010). Building on this foundation, Pierre Bourdieu advanced the concept of cultural capital, showing how symbolic resources such as language, tastes, and educational credentials reproduce social hierarchies across generations (Bourdieu, 1986). Empirical research confirms that cultural capital significantly influences academic achievement, as students with richer cultural resources tend to perform better in school (Jæger, 2018). In the Chinese context, Tan (2023) demonstrated that both cultural and economic family capital strongly predict children's opportunities to enter higher education, reinforcing the durability of social stratification. Longitudinal studies further suggest that cultural capital exerts long-term effects on educational trajectories, influencing not only initial attainment but also life-course outcomes (Georg, 2004). At the same time, scholars emphasize the growing role of social networks in mediating educational inequality. Homophily and network closure shape access to resources and opportunities. These theoretical contributions underscore that inequality in education cannot be understood merely through economic constraints but must also account for cultural reproduction and social connectivity. The integration of classical and contemporary perspectives allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how education systems perpetuate inequality. Theoretical frameworks thus provide the scaffolding for systematic inquiry, guiding empirical studies and shaping policy interventions aimed at reducing stratification. As such, the theoretical foundations of educational inequality are not static but continually evolving to reflect changing societal dynamics. Together, these perspectives provide a robust platform for understanding how educational outcomes are stratified across different social groups. They also illuminate why inequality persists despite policy efforts to expand access and improve equity. This underscores the critical importance of grounding educational research in sociological theory, ensuring that structural and cultural factors remain central in analyses of educational disparity.

Educational inequality is also deeply shaped by structural and institutional factors that operate beyond individual or family-level resources. Research has shown that school funding mechanisms often reinforce inequality, as schools in wealthier neighborhoods receive greater resources and provide higher-quality education compared to those serving disadvantaged populations (Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016). Institutional segregation by residential zoning policies further amplifies disparities, with children from low-income families disproportionately concentrated in under-resourced schools (Bischoff & Tach, 2020). At the same time, teacher quality and distribution are highly unequal, with disadvantaged schools more likely to employ less experienced or less qualified teachers, thereby exacerbating educational gaps (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2010). Evidence from developing countries also illustrates how institutional weaknesses such as insufficient infrastructure and lack of

instructional materials limit educational opportunities and outcomes (Bold et al., 2017). Additionally, structural discrimination along the lines of gender, ethnicity, and migration status often intersects with institutional barriers, producing compounded disadvantages for marginalized students (Sirin, 2005). In higher education, admission policies and meritocratic rhetoric frequently mask structural biases that privilege students from elite schools and backgrounds (Marginson, 2016). These institutional dynamics confirm that educational inequality is not simply the byproduct of family resources, but the result of systemic reproduction embedded within policy and organizational practices. Comparative evidence from cross-national studies further demonstrates that institutional arrangements such as tracking systems, early selection, and accountability regimes play a critical role in shaping inequality trajectories (Pfeffer, 2008). The persistence of these patterns suggests that reforms focusing solely on expanding access are insufficient without addressing the structural reproduction of inequality. Institutional inertia also contributes to the durability of disparities, as entrenched systems resist transformation even when equity-oriented policies are introduced (Reardon & Owens, 2014). Sociological inquiry underscores that inequality is embedded not only in cultural and social dynamics, but also in the institutional architecture of educational systems. A full understanding of educational inequality therefore requires careful attention to how institutions and structures systematically advantage certain groups while disadvantaging others. This perspective also highlights the need for policy interventions that dismantle structural barriers and reallocate institutional resources more equitably. Analyzing institutional factors reveals the embeddedness of inequality within educational systems, demonstrating that structural reforms are essential to promoting equitable outcomes across diverse contexts.

Despite the extensive body of literature addressing educational inequality, significant research gaps remain that limit both theoretical understanding and practical interventions. Much of the scholarship has been dominated by studies from high-income Western countries, leaving a relative paucity of comparative evidence from low- and middle-income contexts where inequality often manifests differently (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). This geographic imbalance in the literature restricts the generalizability of theoretical models, as educational stratification in developing countries may be shaped by distinct institutional and cultural dynamics (Unterhalter, 2017). While cultural capital theory has been widely applied, there is insufficient attention to how cultural resources intersect with race, gender, and migration status to produce multidimensional disadvantages (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Intersectionality remains underexplored, despite evidence that overlapping identities exacerbate educational disparities (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Another gap lies in the lack of longitudinal and life-course perspectives that examine how early inequalities compound over time to affect later educational and occupational outcomes (Heckman & Mosso, 2014). Cross-national studies have also highlighted that institutional arrangements, such as early tracking, have divergent effects across countries, yet there is limited theorization of why such institutional variation produces different equity outcomes (Horn, 2009). Research has disproportionately emphasized quantitative approaches, with relatively few qualitative or mixed-method studies that capture the lived experiences of marginalized students (Reay, 2017). This methodological imbalance hinders a fuller understanding of how inequality is subjectively experienced and navigated. Another critical gap involves the underrepresentation of digital inequality in the literature, as the rise of online learning platforms has created new divides in access to educational opportunities (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). Although numerous policy studies recommend equity reforms, few systematically evaluate the long-term effectiveness of these interventions across diverse contexts (Allmendinger & Leibfried, 2003). These limitations demonstrate that the current knowledge base, while substantial, remains uneven, fragmented, and insufficiently attuned to the complexity of educational inequality. Addressing these research gaps is essential for

developing more robust theories and evidence-based policies that reflect the realities of diverse populations.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated examination of how social stratification, cultural capital, and access to learning opportunities intersect to shape educational inequality across diverse contexts. Previous reviews have often analyzed these factors in isolation, but few have provided a systematic synthesis that highlights their interconnected dynamics (Mijs, 2016). By drawing on multiple sociological frameworks, this article contributes a more holistic perspective that accounts for both structural and cultural dimensions of inequality (Bernardi & Ballarino, 2016). While prior studies have documented persistent disparities in either family background or institutional arrangements, this review uniquely situates these elements within a comparative framework, thereby offering insights that are relevant across different national and policy contexts (Breen & Müller, 2020). The article also advances the field by foregrounding the ways in which cultural capital not only reproduces privilege but interacts with institutional mechanisms to amplify inequality (Jæger & Møllegaard, 2017). In doing so, it builds on but extends beyond traditional applications of Bourdieu's theory by showing how symbolic resources combine with policy environments to shape learning trajectories (Lareau, 2015). Furthermore, this review responds to calls for more integrative analyses that bridge micro-level sociological theories with macro-level institutional research (Arum, Beattie, & Ford, 2019). Its contribution also lies in synthesizing recent evidence on digital learning divides, an emerging yet underexplored factor in contemporary educational inequality (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2021). By integrating these dimensions, the article contributes both theoretically, by refining sociological models of inequality, and practically, by offering evidence-based insights for policymakers seeking to reduce disparities. The novelty is thus twofold: first, in advancing a multi-dimensional conceptualization of inequality that bridges classical and contemporary approaches; and second, in situating these dynamics within a global comparative perspective that addresses contexts often overlooked in prior research. These contributions enrich the sociological discourse on education and provide a foundation for more nuanced theoretical debates and practical reforms. This study positions itself as a bridge between fragmented strands of literature, producing a cohesive account of how multiple factors converge to sustain educational inequality worldwide.

The primary objective of this study is to synthesize and critically analyze sociological perspectives on educational inequality by systematically reviewing literature that addresses the interplay of social stratification, cultural capital, and access to learning opportunities. In contrast to prior research that often investigates these dimensions separately, the study aims to develop an integrative framework that highlights their intersections and cumulative effects on educational outcomes (Bernardi & Triventi, 2020). The review seeks to answer the question of how inequality in education is reproduced through both structural and cultural mechanisms, drawing upon diverse empirical and theoretical contributions (Ball, 2017). It also intends to provide comparative insights by incorporating findings from different sociopolitical contexts, thereby expanding the scope of sociological inquiry beyond Western-centric frameworks (Chudgar & Luschei, 2009). Another objective is to evaluate how classical theories, such as Bourdieu's cultural capital, remain relevant in explaining contemporary forms of inequality, while also integrating emerging perspectives on digital divides and global transformations in education (Buhr, 2020). This study further aspires to identify methodological gaps in the literature, especially the underutilization of qualitative and mixed-method approaches that can capture the lived experiences of marginalized groups (Reay, 2017). The objective includes clarifying the role of institutional arrangements such as tracking, accountability systems, and funding formulas in either mitigating or reinforcing stratified educational outcomes (Bol & van de Werfhorst, 2013). By doing so, the study contributes to building a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of inequality that bridges micro-level sociological analyses

with macro-level policy debates (Brown, Lauder, & Cheung, 2020). It also aims to generate insights that can inform policymakers and practitioners about strategies to reduce inequities, particularly by highlighting how structural reforms must be complemented by cultural interventions. The overarching objective is to advance sociological theory while simultaneously offering practical implications for creating more inclusive and equitable education systems. By situating these objectives within a global comparative perspective, the study underscores its ambition to enrich both scholarly discourse and policy reform agendas. The objectives are designed not only to deepen theoretical knowledge but also to provide actionable insights for addressing the enduring problem of educational inequality worldwide.

B. METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review approach to synthesize existing knowledge on educational inequality through the lens of sociological perspectives, particularly focusing on social stratification, cultural capital, and access to learning opportunities. The review process was designed to ensure rigor, transparency, and replicability by establishing clear inclusion and exclusion criteria prior to the selection of sources. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and reputable institutional reports were considered, with an emphasis on works that explicitly addressed the sociological dimensions of inequality in education. The literature search was conducted across multiple databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, to capture a wide range of relevant studies. Keywords and search strings were carefully formulated to cover variations of central concepts, ensuring comprehensive retrieval of publications that explored both classical and contemporary theoretical contributions. The temporal scope of the review focused on works published in the last two decades to capture recent developments, while still incorporating seminal contributions that remain foundational to the discourse. Abstracts and full texts were screened in multiple stages, beginning with title relevance and followed by content evaluation to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. Articles that lacked theoretical depth or did not explicitly discuss inequality in relation to stratification, cultural capital, or access were excluded. To minimize bias, the selection process involved cross-checking results from different databases and re-evaluating borderline cases through iterative discussions within the research framework. The final corpus of literature was then organized thematically to reflect the main axes of analysis, namely structural, cultural, and institutional dimensions of educational inequality. Data extraction involved summarizing the key arguments, methodological approaches, and findings of each study, which were then synthesized into comparative categories. Thematic coding was employed to identify patterns, convergences, and divergences across different strands of research. Particular attention was paid to the interplay between theoretical constructs and empirical findings, as the aim of this review was not merely descriptive but analytical in nature. The process of synthesis sought to move beyond isolated findings to construct an integrative framework that highlights the dynamic interconnections between social stratification, cultural capital, and access to opportunities. In doing so, the methods adopted in this study allowed for a critical consolidation of insights that span multiple contexts and disciplines. The literature review was therefore both systematic and interpretive, combining structured selection with conceptual analysis. This methodological design ensured that the review not only maps existing knowledge but also identifies limitations, contradictions, and gaps in the field. The methods provide a rigorous basis for producing a coherent narrative that advances sociological understanding of educational inequality.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Social Stratification Continues to Strongly Determine Educational Trajectories

Educational trajectories are deeply shaped by the enduring influence of social stratification, and this dynamic remains one of the most powerful determinants of inequality in learning outcomes. Children from affluent families typically begin their schooling with significant advantages, including enriched early learning experiences, access to high-quality schools, and supportive home environments that cultivate academic readiness.

These advantages accumulate over time, ensuring that initial gaps in achievement grow larger as students progress through educational systems. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in contrast, often face constraints that limit their opportunities to compete on equal terms, such as limited parental resources, inadequate neighborhood schools, and fewer extracurricular learning opportunities.

Social stratification also influences students' expectations and aspirations, as families with greater economic security can transmit confidence and ambition that sustain educational persistence. Educational institutions frequently mirror these inequalities by allocating resources and opportunities in ways that align with pre-existing social hierarchies. This creates a feedback loop where privilege reproduces privilege, while disadvantage perpetuates disadvantage. The cumulative nature of these processes means that social stratification does not simply shape a single stage of education but influences outcomes across the life course, from primary schooling to higher education and eventual labor market entry.

The impact is visible not only in academic achievement but also in the types of schools attended, the qualifications obtained, and the occupational opportunities pursued. Educational systems often emphasize meritocratic ideals, yet these ideals are undermined by structural realities that tie success to social origin. As a result, education frequently reinforces rather than reduces broader patterns of inequality. The resilience of stratification demonstrates that policies targeting only access without addressing systemic disparities are unlikely to succeed in leveling the playing field.

This finding underscores the necessity of examining education not as a neutral institution but as a space where social hierarchies are reproduced. It further highlights that achieving equity requires dismantling the structural mechanisms that allow class-based advantages to dictate outcomes. The persistence of stratification confirms that educational inequality remains embedded in broader societal dynamics rather than isolated individual deficits

2. Cultural Capital Plays a Central Role in Reproducing Inequality

Cultural capital functions as a critical mechanism through which educational inequality is reproduced across generations, shaping how students access, interpret, and succeed within educational systems. Children from families with abundant cultural resources often arrive at school with linguistic skills, social behaviors, and cultural knowledge that align closely with institutional expectations. These students are more likely to participate actively in classroom discussions, understand implicit academic norms, and build favorable relationships with teachers, all of which enhance their performance and visibility. In contrast, students with limited cultural capital may struggle to meet these unspoken standards, leading to perceptions of lower ability despite having comparable potential.

This dynamic places disadvantaged learners at a systemic disadvantage, as schools often reward familiarity with dominant cultural codes rather than pure intellectual capacity. Over time, the cumulative advantages of cultural capital translate into higher grades, greater access to elite programs, and stronger chances of admission to prestigious institutions. The influence of cultural capital extends beyond the classroom, as it shapes students' participation in extracurricular activities, engagement with cultural institutions, and readiness to pursue advanced education. Families with extensive cultural resources are also more adept at navigating bureaucratic processes, securing additional academic support, and advocating for

their children's needs. Consequently, cultural capital not only reflects existing privilege but actively sustains it through continuous reinforcement within educational contexts. The reproduction of inequality through cultural means demonstrates that education is not a neutral meritocratic system but one that privileges students whose cultural backgrounds resonate with institutional norms. As a result, Schools become sites where symbolic advantages are converted into concrete academic success, perpetuating stratified outcomes.

This mechanism is similar to how symbolic recognition in social media encourages self-presentation behaviors that reproduce unequal patterns of validation among adolescents (Engkus, Hikmat, & Saminnurahmat, 2017). It also highlights that reducing inequality requires rethinking pedagogical practices and institutional structures that implicitly favor dominant cultural codes. Without addressing this hidden curriculum, educational reforms risk reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them. Cultural capital demonstrates how subtle and symbolic resources hold profound power in determining who succeeds and who falls behind in educational systems.

3. Institutional and Structural Arrangements Amplify Disparities

Institutional and structural arrangements operate as powerful forces that shape and intensify patterns of educational inequality across societies. Schools are not neutral spaces but are embedded within larger systems that distribute resources unequally and reinforce pre-existing social hierarchies. Funding models often allocate greater financial support to schools serving wealthier communities, ensuring access to better facilities, more advanced curricula, and highly qualified teachers. Schools in disadvantaged areas struggle with overcrowded classrooms, insufficient instructional materials, and higher teacher turnover, all of which constrain student achievement. Structural arrangements such as tracking and early selection further compound inequalities by sorting students into academic pathways that reflect social origins rather than actual potential. Admission policies, standardized testing practices, and accountability frameworks frequently privilege students who already benefit from cultural and economic advantages, thereby reproducing social divisions under the guise of meritocracy.

These mechanisms create institutional pathways that disproportionately channel privileged students toward prestigious educational opportunities while relegating others to lower tracks with limited prospects. Structural barriers also extend into higher education, where selective universities admit a disproportionate number of students from elite schools, further entrenching stratification. The persistence of these patterns illustrates how institutional arrangements systematically advantage certain groups while marginalizing others, making inequality a product of design rather than accident. Moreover, reforms intended to promote equity often fall short when they fail to address the structural roots of disparity, leading to cycles of superficial change without meaningful transformation. Schools therefore serve as both sites of opportunity and engines of reproduction, simultaneously offering mobility to some while cementing disadvantage for others. The durability of institutional inequality demonstrates that education functions less as a great equalizer and more as a mechanism for maintaining the status quo.

This finding, highlights that addressing educational disparities requires more than incremental policy adjustments; it demands structural reform that redistributes resources, revises admission practices, and rethinks accountability systems. Without systemic change, institutions will continue to amplify disparities rather than mitigate them. Institutional and structural arrangements illustrate how inequality is not merely inherited from families but is actively sustained by the very organizations designed to provide education.

4. Intersectional and Comparative Gaps Remain Underexplored

Educational inequality is not experienced uniformly, but rather through the intersections of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and migration status, yet research addressing these complexities remains limited. Students who belong to multiple marginalized categories often face compounded disadvantages that cannot be fully explained by socioeconomic status alone. For example, low-income girls in rural contexts may encounter both material barriers to schooling and cultural norms that restrict their educational participation.

Similarly, children from ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds frequently experience discrimination, language barriers, and institutional biases that intersect with economic hardship to shape educational outcomes. Despite the significance of these overlapping dynamics, many studies continue to analyze inequality through singular categories, overlooking how disadvantages accumulate across dimensions of identity. Comparative gaps also persist, as most empirical research focuses on Western or high-income contexts, while low- and middle-income countries remain underrepresented.

This imbalance leaves unanswered questions about how intersectional inequalities operate in societies with different cultural, political, and institutional frameworks. Cross-national research is crucial, as educational systems vary widely in terms of structure, tracking, and resource allocation, which in turn influence how inequalities manifest. Yet comparative studies remain scarce, limiting the ability to draw broader conclusions about global patterns of inequality. The lack of intersectional and comparative analyses contributes to a fragmented knowledge base, where the unique experiences of marginalized groups remain invisible or under-theorized.

This gap also weakens policy recommendations, as interventions designed without considering intersecting identities or diverse contexts risk being ineffective or even counterproductive. Addressing these omissions requires research designs that capture the complexity of lived experiences, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches across different societies. It also requires theoretical frameworks that move beyond linear explanations of inequality to account for how multiple forms of disadvantage overlap and reinforce each other. Without intersectional and comparative perspectives, the study of educational inequality risks presenting an incomplete picture that underestimates the depth and diversity of challenges faced by marginalized students. This finding emphasizes the urgency of broadening the scope of research to include voices and contexts that have been historically overlooked, ensuring that sociological inquiry reflects the realities of all learners.

5. Digital Divides and Global Transformations Create New Forms of Inequality

The rapid expansion of digital technologies in education has introduced new forms of inequality that intersect with existing social and cultural divides. While digital learning platforms, online resources, and virtual classrooms promise to democratize access to knowledge, these opportunities are unevenly distributed across socioeconomic groups. Students from wealthier families are more likely to possess reliable internet access, updated devices, and digital literacy skills, enabling them to take full advantage of online learning. In contrast, disadvantaged students often face unstable connectivity, shared or outdated devices, and limited support at home, leaving them at a structural disadvantage in technology-driven education.

This divide became particularly evident during the global shift to remote learning, where students without adequate digital resources fell further behind their peers. A study of distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia highlighted that online modalities using Zoom and WhatsApp were only effective for theory-based courses, whereas practical and fieldwork courses suffered significant learning disruption (Hikmat et al., 2020). The digital divide thus operates at multiple levels, encompassing physical access, skills, and meaningful use of technology. Moreover, global transformations in education, including the

rise of international online courses and digital credentialing, tend to benefit those already advantaged, reinforcing stratification on a transnational scale. Educational institutions, while embracing digital innovations, often fail to design inclusive platforms that address the specific needs of marginalized learners.

This exclusion deepens inequalities by embedding technological proficiency as a new prerequisite for academic success. At the same time, the integration of artificial intelligence, data-driven assessments, and algorithmic decision-making raises concerns about reproducing existing biases in digital form. Digital inequality therefore represents not only a gap in material resources but also a structural barrier that redefines what counts as educational competence in the 21st century. As digital learning continues to expand, these disparities risk becoming entrenched, with long-term consequences for social mobility and equity. The persistence of such divides highlights that technological progress in education does not automatically translate into inclusivity. Without targeted interventions to close digital gaps, global transformations will likely reinforce rather than reduce inequality. This finding demonstrates that educational inequality in the digital age extends beyond classrooms and policies, encompassing the technological infrastructures that increasingly define opportunities for learning.

This analysis reveals how our systematic review aligns with and diverges from existing literature on educational stratification: consistent with foundational research, socioeconomic status remains among the most potent predictors of educational outcomes, as demonstrated by evidence of persistent performance gaps between children from low- and high-SES backgrounds at school entry (Education Policy Institute, 2023). Our findings resonate with economic models highlighting how family investment choices reinforce the link between inequality and educational attainment (Blanden, Doepke, & Stuhler, 2022). They extend these insights by emphasizing how social networks and similarity bias independently stabilize educational disparities even in mixed-settings, a mechanism gaining recognition in recent studies. Unlike prior research that often pauses at tracking early performance gaps, our review emphasizes the cumulative, longitudinal nature of stratification echoing life-course theories of staged advantage that illustrate how initial differences amplify over time (Grodsky, 2021). While much of the literature focuses on early schooling phases or tertiary access, our analysis underscores that stratification persists and even intensifies through graduate and professional education channels, reinforcing elite formation (Posselt, 2017). We also add a global comparative lens, showing how the magnitude of SES-based educational inequality varies significantly across countries, as documented in several international reviews (Terschuur, 2022). In integrating these multiple levels early childhood, life-course, graduate studies, social networks, and cross-national variation our review offers a more layered understanding: stratification is not static or context-limited but a dynamic and persistent force. This comparative synthesis underscores that interventions must be multifaceted and targeted across educational stages and social processes to disrupt these entrenched inequalities effectively.

Diverse empirical studies reinforce how cultural capital functions as a mechanism that systematically reinforces educational inequality, often in more nuanced and context-dependent ways than initially posited by classical theory. Jæger (2018) has documented how unequal distribution of cultural capital strongly correlates with educational disparities, demonstrating that students from culturally rich backgrounds consistently outperform peers without these advantages. Roksa (2011), using U.S. longitudinal data, revealed that parenting practices manifestations of cultural capital transmit class-based advantages across generations by shaping academic achievement trajectories. When variant forms of cultural capital are measured, as in recent research from China, the types of capital matter: institutionalized and objectified cultural resources positively influence students' academic engagement and aspirations, though sometimes paradoxically showing weaker links to raw achievement (Tan

& Fang, 2023). Estonian research further extends these insights by showing that home libraries a form of cultural capital multiplicatively amplify children's educational attainment, evidencing that cultural assets can significantly elevate outcomes in certain institutional configurations. Jin et al. (2024) bring in a gendered perspective, noting that maternal education exerts stronger influence on girls' academic performance, emphasizing how cultural capital impacts vary across demographic groups. These findings converge to illustrate that cultural capital is not a uniform resource but operates interactively across domains family-driven practices, material resources, and parental education with differential effects across contexts, disciplines, and demographic groups. Unlike classical applications, these modern research contributions demonstrate that cultural capital reproduces inequality not only by providing familiarity with institutional norms but by actively shaping motivation, engagement, and gendered expectations. Our finding aligns with but also enriches prior literature by emphasizing the conditional, multi-dimensional pathways through which cultural capital sustains educational stratification.

Institutional structures consistently reproduce educational inequality by shaping access to resources and opportunities in ways that advantage privileged groups. Owens, Reardon, and Jencks (2016) show that income segregation between schools has grown significantly, ensuring that affluent communities concentrate resources within their own educational systems. Reardon and Owens (2014) argue that six decades after *Brown v. Board of Education*, school segregation persists and continues to limit equal opportunity for disadvantaged students. Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2010) demonstrate that teacher quality and credentials, which are disproportionately available in higher-income schools, directly affect student achievement and reinforce systemic disparities. Hanushek and Wößmann (2006) provide evidence that early educational tracking amplifies inequality by channeling students into rigid pathways that reflect social background rather than academic ability. Bol and van de Werfhorst (2013) confirm that education systems with strong stratification mechanisms create a trade-off between efficient labor market allocation and equality of opportunity and education systems must cultivate digital and data literacy as part of broader readiness strategies for Society 5.0 (Hikmat, 2022), intensifying gaps in attainment. Lafortune, Rothstein, and Schanzenbach (2018) further establish that finance reforms targeting equity can reduce disparities, but only when they address systemic funding inequalities across districts. Comparative analysis of these findings highlights that institutions not only mirror existing social inequalities but also actively reproduce them through structural arrangements such as funding formulas, tracking policies, and teacher distribution. Our review underscores that institutional disparities are not incidental but embedded in educational systems by design, which magnifies the reproduction of privilege and disadvantage across generations. Structural reforms therefore require transformative rather than incremental approaches if they are to effectively reduce persistent inequities.

Intersectional and comparative analyses remain insufficient in the study of educational inequality, and this limitation constrains both theoretical development and policy design. Collins and Bilge (2020) emphasize that intersectionality reveals how multiple social categories such as race, gender, and class interact to produce unique forms of disadvantage that single-axis studies cannot capture. Crenshaw (1989) first introduced this framework in legal scholarship, and education researchers have since recognized its value for explaining overlapping marginalizations. Evans, Williams, and Froehlich (2019) demonstrate that intersectional disadvantage operates in higher education by showing how minority women face compounded barriers in access and outcomes. Choo and Ferree (2010) argue that without intersectionality, sociological analyses risk oversimplifying inequality and failing to represent marginalized groups adequately. Comparative studies also highlight significant gaps because cross-national research has shown how institutional settings moderate the impact of social

background on educational attainment (Pfeffer, 2008). Marginson (2016) further notes that differences between high-participation systems and elite systems generate divergent patterns of inequality, yet comparative theory remains underdeveloped. Unterhalter (2017) stresses that gendered educational inequalities in the Global South remain particularly under-researched, leading to a skewed literature that privileges Western contexts. Research therefore demonstrates that inequality cannot be fully understood without attention to the interplay of multiple social identities and cross-national institutional diversity. Our review underscores that these gaps limit the explanatory power of current frameworks and reduce the effectiveness of equity-oriented policies. Intersectional and comparative approaches must be expanded if the field is to produce knowledge that reflects the diversity of learners' realities and informs policies that are both context-sensitive and socially just.

Digital transformations in education have created new forms of inequality that intersect with pre-existing structural and cultural divides. Van Deursen and van Dijk (2019) highlight that the digital divide has shifted from issues of physical access to inequalities in skills and material resources, demonstrating that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face multi-level barriers in technology use. Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010) emphasize that unequal access to digital literacy translates into divergent educational outcomes, as technology-rich environments disproportionately benefit already advantaged learners. DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001) argue that digital inequality must be analyzed not only in terms of access but also in terms of quality and types of usage, because these distinctions shape long-term opportunities for learning and mobility. Robinson et al. (2020) show that digital inequalities replicate and reinforce traditional social hierarchies, revealing that online education often reflects offline privilege. Beuermann et al. (2015) provide experimental evidence that computer-assisted learning can significantly improve outcomes, yet such interventions remain inaccessible to many disadvantaged students due to systemic inequities.

These studies collectively confirm that digital technology is not inherently equalizing but functions within social systems that amplify pre-existing inequalities. Our review extends this scholarship by highlighting that digital divides are now embedded within global transformations, where access to international online courses and AI-driven platforms benefits elite groups far more than marginalized learners. This dynamic indicates that digital inequality represents both a continuation of traditional stratification and the emergence of a new dimension of educational disadvantage. Without targeted interventions to ensure inclusive digital participation, educational systems will continue to replicate inequities in increasingly sophisticated ways.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that educational inequality remains a persistent and multifaceted challenge that requires deeper sociological understanding and more comprehensive policy interventions. The review shows that social stratification continues to determine educational outcomes by shaping opportunities from early childhood through higher education. Families with greater economic resources transmit advantages that accumulate over time, while disadvantaged students face barriers that restrict mobility. Cultural capital emerges as another central force, as symbolic resources such as language, values, and educational knowledge are rewarded in ways that privilege certain groups. Institutions amplify these disparities by structuring education through funding mechanisms, teacher distribution, and tracking systems that favor those who already hold advantages. Intersectional dimensions of inequality further complicate the issue, as gender, race, ethnicity, and migration status create overlapping disadvantages that remain insufficiently examined in many contexts. Comparative perspectives demonstrate that inequality manifests differently across societies, yet structural reproduction of privilege remains a global phenomenon. The rise of digital education has introduced new

layers of inequality, as access to technology and digital literacy increasingly defines success in contemporary education. Digital divides show that innovation without inclusion only deepens disparities rather than reducing them. The synthesis highlights that educational inequality is not merely an outcome of individual differences but a structural and cultural problem embedded in the very design of educational systems. This conclusion emphasizes that reducing inequality requires interventions that address both economic and cultural barriers simultaneously. Policy must redistribute resources more equitably and redesign institutional arrangements that reinforce stratification. Pedagogical practices must become more inclusive and recognize the diverse cultural backgrounds of learners. Research must adopt intersectional and comparative perspectives to reflect the complexity of global educational inequality. Sociological theory must continue to evolve by integrating classical insights with contemporary challenges, including digital transformations. Without such multidimensional approaches, inequality in education will remain entrenched and will continue to reproduce broader social hierarchies. This study therefore calls for education to be reimagined as a transformative institution that actively disrupts rather than reinforces social divides. Only through structural reforms, inclusive pedagogies, and equitable digital strategies can education fulfill its promise as a pathway to social justice and mobility.

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