

Viewing the Marketisation of Education in the Framework of Marxist Theory and Bourdieu's Theory

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ABSTRACT

Guided by Marxist theory and Bourdieu's theory of capital, this paper explores the impact of the marketisation of education on society by analysing the case of Hengshui Middle School in China in terms of its expansion in the education market. The paper finds that the impact of the marketisation of education on society is the pro and con side of a coin, as it optimises the allocation of educational resources in society to a certain extent while also having a negative impact on social justice and equity; in addition to this, the paper also compares Marxian and Bourdieu's theories while elaborating on them, finding that Bourdieu's theory is able to embody more insights in explaining educational equity.

1. Introduction

With the prevalence of neoliberalism, the concept of free trade competition has influenced all parts of the world (Helleiner, 1994). In 1987, China was affected by neoliberalism, and the country slowly transformed from a planned economy into a market economy. An increasing amount of capital has gradually poured into all walks of life, including education. Moreover, marketisation in education has led to more choice for students and parents. Nevertheless, the concept of school choice and the marketisation of education are widely debated in academic research. Altenhofen et al. (2016) argue that school choice exacerbates educational inequalities as standards of teaching and educational resources may differ between schools creating polarisation (Yoon et al., 2020; Choi, 2020). Angus (2015) claims that the relationship between parents, schools, and the state has changed due to the shift in school choice from educational rights to consumer goods. However, Wohlstetter and Farrell (2013) claim that increased choice in education contributes to student achievement via competitiveness, and provides equal opportunities to enter quality schools (Apple, 2004). Nevertheless, Coldron et al. (2010, p.26) argue that the advantages of competition largely benefit middle class families.

Education theory often has an important impact on social justice and equity. Bourdieu's capital theory states that education is the place where society is the re-emergence of inequality. In other words, the existence of social class creates further inequities in education. Marx also suggests that schools tend to replicate the unequal labour status created by the economic system (Anyon, 2011:20). Thus, under the context of these two theories, this essay argues that school-choice or the emergence of education marketisation has optimised the allocation of educational

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resources in society to a certain extent, however they have a detrimental impact on social justice and equity.

First, this essay will review the market mechanism, social fairness, and justice. Hengshui Middle School is used as a case study to illustrate secondary school education and social equity under marketisation. Then, Bourdieu's and Marx's theory will be introduced and analyzed. Moreover, the relationship between school choice and social justice will be analysed in combination with the comparative criticism of Marx's and Bourdieu's theory.

2. Social Justice and Equity

Schooling is inextricably linked to social equity. Marx believed that education was counterproductive to society, while Bourdieu states that schools regenerate social injustices. Thus, only by understanding the definition and meaning of social justice and equity can the relationship between school education, social justice, and equity be better understood. According to the principles of Rawl's (1971) theory of justice, everyone has a system of freedom and fundamental equal rights. Most notably, social justice and equity are inextricably linked to individuals, societies, and nations; however, Education equity and justice is a microcosm of social equity; as such, justice and equity in school education focuses on illustrating its social impact.

To put it another way, educational equity is an extension and manifestation of social justice values in education, including equal rights and educational opportunities. Jacob and Holsinger (2008, p.4) note that educational equity is "taking into account the relationship between social justice in education and the equity and impartiality of distribution at all levels of education or subsectors of education." Each person allocates a proportionate share based on their educational growth potential, including precious resources such as educational facilities, financial input, and instructor level, which are conducive to social and educational justice.

However, people's values and behaviour patterns have change dramatically as a result of the transformation of the social market. Economic interests have gradually become the dominant value orientation of society, resulting in increased competition for educational resources between classes and inequality in educational rights (Gil,2013). More specifically, the market phenomenon has led students and parents to further dominate school choices and professional decisions (Altenhofen et al., 2016), developing a trend towards the marketisation of education. Families with capital advantages provide their offspring with a higher quality education whenever possible (Ball, 2003, Chapter 3, p.20). Conversely, the disadvantaged are unable to compete for educational resources, and they are more likely to choose poorly equipped and underfunded schools (Rhodes & DeLuca ,2014), thereby exacerbating the trend of marginalisation. Form the above discussion, when the marketisation of education makes the class gap bigger. As Bourdieu's suggest schools can make a became places where the poor were poorer and the rich were richer.

3. Education Marketisation

In addition, it is essential to understand the components of the market to accurately analyse social justice. As Winch & Gingell (2004) argue:

At its simplest, a market is a location where buyers and sellers are brought together to exchange goods. Ideally, buyers and sellers should be instantly aware of all prices at which goods are offered (prices) and of all offers from potential customers (offers). The information should allow buyers and sellers to adjust prices and offers until the market 'clears', that is, all offers are accepted. The most obvious example of a market is a

country vegetable fair where stallholders display their goods and buyers can inspect the offerings of different stall holders. They can also ‘haggle’ about the price. From the point of view of the seller, the price must reflect the labour put into the product, together with a profit. The price will also reflect the demand for the product, which will depend in turn on the competition amongst sellers and the number of buyers (p7).

In other words, a market is a combination of the demand for a particular type of product or service at a particular time and space. There are three main characteristics underpinning a market: supply and demand, competition, and insight. First, for supply and demand, different products and services correspond to matching supply chains, and one cannot be missing from the other. Meanwhile, the size of the market can be quantified in a specific time and space.

Second, markets can be segmented. Markets can be categorised into potential markets, ineffective markets, and efficient markets based on psychological, behavioural, and habitual composition of the demand side (consumers). Third, when there is a market there is competition. With the rise of manufacturing and technology in the internet era, the commercial dominance of a particular product or service is vital. Finally, insight is the ability to predict future market patterns. There are other cultural, economic, and demographic elements that influence future trends. Therefore, from the viewpoint of the market mechanism, once the market appears in education, the essential features of the market's supply and demand, competition, and insight also exist.

On the supply and demand side, educational institutions market schools using commercial gimmicks as education is productised to attract customers. Moreover, different models such as online education and training providers have been adapted in education to suit consumers’ and students’ needs. Nevertheless, most models are more readily available to middle class families who possess more financial resources. Wealthy patrons can purchase additional educational resources to increase class competitiveness, resulting in the strengthening of social classes and the marginalisation of vulnerable groups.

4. Case study of Hengshui Middle School

Hengshui High School, located in Heng shui city, Hebei Province China, is an ordinary public high school that was once poorly equipped and chaotic. Because of its outdated education management methods, the school lags behind in local rankings. However, after the new principal took over in 1992, the new educational reform was implemented. The school is managed in a strict management, and Key Performance Indicators are assigned to students and teachers. After three years, Hengshui Middle school became the number one public school in Hengshui City. The reputation of the ‘Hengshui Middle School Model’ attracted a lot of experienced and knowledgeable teachers to visit the school. At that time, Hengshui Middle School was considered a “ladder” for the poor and working class to turn their lives around. In other words, people think that schools are considered equal places. It is undeniable that Hengshui Middle School was in the early stage of educational reform with the original intention of serving people from different socio-economic backgrounds. However, under the influence of fame and capital, Hengshui Middle School changed its original educational value and slowly penetrated the education market.

Given the development of marketisation in education, capitalists have used education financing to cooperate with schools to create more Hengshui private schools. Capitalists use the gimmicks of elite schools to recruit students and charge high fees to attract students from all social classes. However, students from middle class families more frequently enrolled after the tuition free was exposed. In 2015, 8000 students from middle class families attended the school (Yijia, 2017), leading to the division of classes in education and undermining educational

equity and social equity. On March 11th 2021, the education group “Hengshui” was successfully listed on the New York Stock Exchange. The listing of education groups has caused great discussion and concern as they do not appear to be concerned with social equity. Rather, they aim to recruit as many students as possible to raise capital and increase their profits in various provinces.

The public schools in Hengshui have given rise to privately-run schools, which earn a large amount of money from students. Children from working-class families are unable to afford these tuition fees, thus unable to enjoy the education provided by the prestigious private schools. On the other hand, children from the middle class can easily receive elite education at Hengshui High School. In fact, many students in China look for schools with ‘Hengshui’ to attend ‘better’ schools, despite places mainly being taken up by students from higher class families. Moreover, the establishment of many branches of Hengshui Middle Schools also affects the enrollment of public schools so that the number of public students become smaller. As Ball (2003, 112) argues, the Hengshui model led to a shift in the education ecosystem towards market value (Ball et al. 1995). The expansion of privatisation in Hengshui Middle School has led to the emergence of privately-run schools that primarily cater to affluent families. This has created a two-tiered education system, widening the gap between schools and families in terms of resources, quality of education, and opportunities. Students from lower-income backgrounds face significant barriers in accessing these private schools, resulting in unequal access to quality education and reinforcing social inequalities. As a consequence, educational equity in China is undermined as the privileged few have easier access to elite education while the less privileged struggle to receive similar opportunities.

5. Understanding Education Marketisation Through Bourdieu's *Habitus* and Capital Theory and Marxist Theory

5.1. Bourdieu on *Habitus*

Bourdieu describes *Habitus* as a 'disposition' (1984, p.170) or 'feeling', in which an individual's habitus is constructed according to their structure and the material conditions of existence that give rise to perceptions, sensations, and practices (Grenfell, 2014, p.50). As Crenfell claims (2014, p.60), “Bourdieu's purpose was to enable structures and agents to have analytical integrity and interconnectedness based on habitus (e.g., "outer" and "inner", individuals and societies, etc)”. Children living in the city are connected to the inner life of the city; as such, the individual forms a habitus unique to the city in relation to the way they behave, speak, and think. On the contrary, rural children formed a different habitus compared to children living in urban areas. These are all biased towards identity and social orientation, depending on different social classes.

Habitus is an important factor in the divide between different classes, and class is an important reason for the formation of education marketisation. Families from the middle class choose middle-class schools, and working-class children choose working-class schools. Because of the emergence of school choice, children from the middle class have more resources and opportunities to choose more schools. Conversely, children from the working class have limited school choice.

In general, Bourdieu habitus's concept is the 'social experience' of society and the 'secondary effects of socialisation' (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992a, p. 127-128). Having said that, habitus are formed subtly when the same class shares values and life experiences. This study, based on Bourdieu's habitus, can provide an insight that the formation of an education materialisation is conducive to improving the quality of education and providing a quality educational

environment for learning places. Moreover, children from middle class families can adapt more quickly to a harsh and quiet learning environment due to their habitus.

On the other hand, habitus reflects an intrinsic link between society and the individual. Individuals may be unique in some ways, but they share the same characteristics as the social group; for example, parents from the upper classes are more likely to have some informal knowledge and skills as their capital. This can be understood by the habitus of class. Thus, in some ways external social forces shape internal dispositions as parents from different classes possess various class habitus. Those from the upper classes prefer private schools to ensure that children have inherent habitus, evident in the case study of Hengshui Middle School, and most of the children in private schools come from the same class background. Most notably, the middle class tends to use education marketisation to nurture and retain the habitus of children because parents with more resources can choose the school that suits their class.

5.2. Bourdieu's Capital Theory

According to Bourdieu's theory, there are three forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. Bourdieu's economic capital derives from Marx's theory of 'Capital', which refers to the fact that 'capital can not only be directly and immediately transformed into money, but also as a material asset in the form of property rights' (1986, p.242). Furthermore, Bourdieu believed that schooling and the family influenced an individual's cultural capital because cultural capital is characterised by concrete and time-consuming investments (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). For Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied cultural capital, (i.e., ability and talent); material cultural capital, which takes the form of cultural goods such as books and art collections; and institutionalised cultural capital (i.e., qualifications). In addition to economic capital and cultural capital, there is social capital. Bourdieu (1986, p.51) argues that 'social capital refers to the sum of potential or actual resources in a mutually recognizable enduring network or institutionalized relationship'. In other words, social capital is an unconscious or conscious investment strategy that acquires membership in social groups and creates a sense of belonging, thereby providing potential or actual support and valuable resources (Ball, 2003:82).

According to Bourdieu's theory of capital and the case study of Hengshui Middle School, middle-class families believe Hengshui middle School is one way to improve or perpetuate their social status. Middle-class families' pursuit of better private schools is an 'academic investment strategy' (Bourdieu, 1986b: 244), ensuring that middle-class children have strong cultural capital. Middle-class families parents can use their economic capital to expose their children to better cultural capital.

Moreover, Hengshui Middle School has high-quality teachers and high-quality learning resources, which are conducive to increasing students' self-efficacy and ability development (Bourdieu, 1986, p.244). Therefore, students' embodied cultural capital can continue to accumulate and gain advantages in social competition. Furthermore, the academic certificates awarded by Hengshui Middle School are institutionalised cultural capital with better social recognition. On the other hand, the education marketisation was also a privilege granted to the middle class, whether intangible or tangible, at least they were able to have the resources to achieve their dreams (Gorard & Fitz, 1998).

However, the working class may not be able to afford private schools. Moreover, the lack of cultural capital of the working class resulted in low levels of support and expectations for their children's education, and they preferred their children to be employed at an early age. As a result, as Bourdieu mentioned (Bourdieu 2018), with the support of cultural capital, the class inequalities of academic achievement were legitimised by school choice or the marketisation

of education. Middle class children have more opportunities to maintain and improve their social status and to create new cultural capital, which seriously undermines social justice and equity.

5.3. The Marxist Theory

According to Marx, classes are divided into proletariat and bourgeoisie. Bourgeoisie is the basis for establishing and managing the social system and the production, while the proletariat is only able to provide labour. Thus, the wealth the proletariat is far less than that of bourgeoisie, which allows children from the bourgeoisie to access a broader choice of schools. The marketisation of education is a means for the bourgeoisie to strengthen its social production and management of the social system. As Omer and Jabeen (2016) state, Marxist theory suggests that class concepts are promoted by the schooling system. Also, Bowles and Gintis (1976) further explain that “education not only reproduces the behaviours and attitudes of the division of labour, but also teaches people how to accept their status and how to are cut and show rulers how to control labour” (P3). Because of the correspondence, education does not seem to be a 'social leveler'. Instead, schools tend to reproduce the unequal labour status created by the economic system (Anyon, 2011, p.20). ‘Correspondence’ means that schools and the future workforce are combined, and schools become an unfair reproduction of the workforce.

As mentioned earlier, families with ability to choose schools have more resources to choose better schools, thus giving them the opportunity to become a better labour force and higher social prestige. Conversely, the fewer resources of working-class families have led to their children's access to regular schools, so that their future workforce is likely to be exploited by capitalists. As Marx highlighted (Anyon, 2011, p.21), ‘capitalism could have both liberating as well as oppressive effects’. Working class students attending public schools with restricted budgets may experience poor teaching and a lack of educational resources. For example, some teachers from non-developed areas rarely explain to students why the problem is done or what the idea means, but more often specify what the children do, causing students to tend to follow the rules and indoctrination of the education.

In contrast, the education system of private schools benefits children from middle class families more than working class children in terms of the curriculum and the language used in schools. Meanwhile, private schools are more about developing skills such as independence and decision-making which are required in professional jobs. Marx’s theory claims that economic class connections have a profound impact on social conditions, not only on the social conditions of the workplace, but also on the democratic and civilised world (Anyon, 2011, p.10). Therefore, school corresponds to the future job requirements of the child (Anyon, 1981). Children from middle-class study in private schools, leading them to a better future. While children from working-class study in regular schools (because of the lack of school choices) tend to follow the rules and become workers in society earlier.

6. Understanding Education Marketisation by Comparing Bourdieu's Habitus and Capital Theory and Marxist Theory

6.1. Strengths and Weaknesses of Bourdieu's Theories

Bourdieu’s theory focuses on reproduction hierarchy and the structure of the education system, including the social inequalities of students and educational institutions in various national settings (Sullivan, 2002). Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and the ideas underpinning capital

theory provide a way to understand the relationship between social class, social justice, and equality, thus generating insights into educational inequities caused by school choices or the marketisation of education.

Capital theory highlights the social structure of the school field and the social inequalities of students (Bok, 2010). Moreover, habitus explains that families of different backgrounds tend to choose schools that reflect their tastes and lifestyles; for example, families from affluent backgrounds choose schools with a 'leading edge' to ensure that this is beneficial for their children (Bourdieu, 1986). In China, children from rural areas who speak English will have rural accents that make them afraid to speak English (Candice, 2021). On the contrary, children from more affluent backgrounds can have their own habitus, and they are cultivated to accents, standard pronunciation, and abundant resources, resulting in them speaking English more confidently. The education marketization provides additional learning opportunities and resources for wealthy families, having these children have access to abundant resources and effective teaching methods.

There are several drawbacks to Bourdieu's theory. First, Bourdieu ignored particularity. For example, working class students attending public schools may achieve good results and experience social mobility. Furthermore, although some working-class families do not have the capital to support their children to choose better schools, they still pay attention to the cultivation of their children's habitus. Bourdieu's theory also ignores biological genetic factors. Some children from the working class, who are naturally smarter, achieving the same results as children from private school in learning and developing high-intensity social resilience. Consequently, cultural capital cannot accurately explain the transformation of achievements without considering the transformation of genes. Overall, children with high intelligence can still be 'like a fish in the water'.

6.2. Strengths and Weaknesses of Marxist Theory

Marxist theory claims that 'schools tend to replicate the unequal labor status created by the economic system' (Anyon, 2011, p.20). Schools aim to equip students with the skills and qualities needed to improve the quality of the workforce. However, 'the substantial equalisation of educational attainment has not led to equalisation of income among individuals' (p.8). In other words, schools divide different workforces on the grounds that schools offer 'hidden curricula' in preparation for adaptation to the working environment (Bowers & Gini, 1976). Furthermore, the concept of 'hidden curriculum has been used by critical Neo-Marxist scholars in their attempts to decipher the various implicit mechanisms in the school system and the larger social environment that preserves power to the dominant middle class and excludes the disadvantaged working-class (Apple, 2004). In other words, the marketization of education has led to the formation of "hidden curricula" in public and private schools in terms of teaching methods, school opportunities and intramural activities, resulting in the segregation of working-class students in terms of school experiences and behaviour patterns.

Moreover, based on Marx's (Anyon, 2011) view, education is transformed into capital through labour (human capital) and general commodities (school choice or the marketisation of education). Materially wealthy families will support their children to go to the best schools, thus becoming a better workforce and gaining a social reputation. At the same time, working-class children often attend public schools, and they are more likely to be exploited, thus reflecting differences in socioeconomic status and cultural capital.

Conversely, there are also some disadvantages to Marx's theory. First, Henry Giroux (2003) argues that working-class students may not fully accept everything that capitalism teaches and they will not be affected by the capitalist system. Therefore, this theory is too absolute. Second,

an increasing number of employers want the workforce to have the ability to think and innovate, rather than a 'robot' that will only obey. As a result, the principle of correspondence does not match today's labour market (Nowak, 2022).

6.3. Comparison and Argument

However, Bourdieu's theory of habitus and capital provides a more comprehensive explanatory power on this issue. Firstly, capital theory explains school choice or the marketisation of education as a structured site of unequal operation and social change between the economic, cultural and social capital of the middle and working classes. Secondly, Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' explains the social orientation of the middle and working classes. Furthermore, Bourdieu theory is more of a means of analysing social phenomena. That is, schools are places where the poor are poorer, and the rich are richer. Comparing with Marxist theory, it is a critique of the future and presents several general ideas of class elimination methods in predicting the future workforce. Moreover, Marxist theory explains that the marketisation of education is the concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' to cultivate different classes of labor (Harvey, 2005), while parental income is a better predictor of students' educational achievement, thus widening the hindrance and achievement gap between the middle and working classes. In other words, students from different classes will be trained into different laborers in future in schools, thus making the marketisation of education exacerbate class divisions. However, this is too absolute. As mentioned earlier, not all students who enter public schools are subject to the capitalist system and become exploited laborers. In addition, the market economy has continued to develop under the influence of liberalism and capitalism. Hengshui Middle School, as the case study of this essay, highlights that the marketisation of education undermines social fairness and justice in education, resulting in an aggravation of the gap between the rich and the poor. Bourdieu's theory of habitus and capital suggests people from different social classes possess different habitus and capital. In other words, Bourdieu measures the educational effects of the individual and the family environment on the individual to summarise the overall educational situation. Therefore, it is useful to use Bourdieu's habits and capital theory to understand the social change of the marketization of education and to analyze the social inequalities brought about by the marketization of education.

7. Conclusion

In the context of Hengshui Middle School, the emergence of privately-run schools associated with the institution has created a system where wealthier families can afford the high tuition fees, gaining access to better educational resources and opportunities. This perpetuates social inequalities as students from lower-income families, lacking the economic and cultural capital, are unable to compete on an equal footing. Bourdieu's theory also sheds light on the reproduction of social hierarchy within Hengshui Middle School. The elite status of the school attracts students from more affluent backgrounds, who bring with them a greater accumulation of cultural capital and advantages in terms of educational support and resources. As a result, these students are more likely to achieve academic success, reinforcing the school's reputation and further widening the gap between different social classes. While Marx's theory offers insights into the exploitative nature of the marketization of education and the commodification of knowledge, Bourdieu's theory provides a more nuanced understanding of how social and cultural factors intersect with economic factors to perpetuate educational inequities. It emphasizes the role of habitus and cultural capital in shaping students' educational experiences and outcomes, highlighting the need to address these structural inequalities to promote a more equitable education system. Therefore, in the case of Hengshui Middle School, Bourdieu's

theory of habitus and capital provides a more profound explanation of the issues surrounding the marketization of education and its impact on social stratification within the school.

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