

Family Background and Academic Performance: A Research on the Effect of Social Stratification in Senior High School Education

Xiaofei Wang PhD Candidate

Department of Sociology, Peking University

Ilikesh12345@163.com

Many previous studies have provided enough evidence to show that social background has been the primary reason for inequalities of children's education in the initial stages of reform and opening-up in China (which was put into effect in 1978). After the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, the degree of injustice and the gap between the rich and the poor widens, which can be clearly indicated in the education field. Since the high-quality educational resources can not meet the demand of all the children, the key kindergarten with good facilities, the key primary school, the key middle school, and the key high school are springing up. The competition for these high-quality is quite serious and sometimes it is largely affected by children's social origin (social background). Now large amounts of research focus on the impact of family's social economic status exerted on children's university-attending and have found that the degree of inequalities in higher education is increasing all the time. However, little studies have paid attention to the inequalities in senior high school period. To some degree, the key senior high school predicts the good performance in the entrance examination to colleges, and the key universities will largely add one's opportunity to find a decent job in the labor market. To put it in another way, it means in contemporary China, whether or not one can be enrolled in key university magnificently depends on the hierarchy of his or her senior high school (that is, key senior high school or ordinary high school). The possibility of entrance to key or ordinary school is determined by students' performance in high school entrance exam, resulting from both students' personal competencies as well as family background. Therefore, it is quite meaningful to study which children can enter the key senior high school? What are the characteristics of their families? In this paper, we will use

economic capital, cultural capital, and parenting style as the indicators of family background, and deeply study the extent to which they impact children's opportunities to the key senior high school. This paper primarily examines the interrelationships connecting family background and students' academic attainment. Based on the questionnaire survey conducted in 6 senior high schools in Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang Province in northeast China, the sample consists of 2028 senior high school freshman.

As to the economic capital, we use the classic indicator which is the family's monthly income to measure. Since in contemporary China, the high-quality educational resources are still scarce, strong economic capital indicates the effective purchasing power, which can benefit children and help them success in the examination. The economic capital directly affects parents' purchasing of education resources in the market and their investment in children's education. It is the original root of educational inequality in the education marketization' atmosphere.

As to the cultural capital, we use the following indicators to measure: parents' educational level, parents' frequencies of newspaper reading, parents' frequencies of book reading, parents' frequencies of internet using, and parents' degree of attention of current affairs. After analyzing the indicator above, this paper uses the factor analysis method to summarize these variables and construct a new variable called the score of family cultural capital, which then be divided into three levels: the high-quantity cultural capital, the middle-quantity cultural capital, and the low-quantity cultural capital. It is a more intuitive way to indicate the abstract concept "cultural capital" and make it comparable between different cases.

Except for the economic capital and cultural capital, this paper also studies fathers' party membership (whether he is the member of Chinese Democratic Parties or Chinese Communist Party) for sometimes the identity of party membership will provide the individual with some valuable resources which can not be easily gained. Therefore it is an important indicator of family background.

However, besides the economic capital, cultural capital, fathers' party membership and stratification position, which are the classic indicators of social

background to predict the children's educational attainment, parenting style (parents' participation in children's study) is also an effective indicator of education outcome. Several previous studies have demonstrated that highly educated mothers and fathers parent differently from less-educated parents. In our research, we use eight different questions to measure parenting styles during children's daily study, that are, parents' degree of attention to children's study, parents' frequencies of communication with children about their affairs in school, parents' time control on children's TV-watching, parents' frequencies of listening to children's problems, parents' frequencies of attending the teacher-parent conference, and parent's expectations on children's future. By analyzing the relationship of these variables, the author uses the factor analysis to reduce the previous data. At last, we extracted three variables called "parents' communication factor", "parents' attention factor" and "parents' control factor". We then analyzed the mechanism of these three variables on children's educational outcome.

Then, after all the analysis above, we construct the prediction model called "the probabilities for children to go to key senior high school". We use the dummy variable (whether the student goes to the key senior high school) as the dependent variable and the family background indicators such as the economic capital, cultural capital, father's membership, and parenting style as the independent variables. Through the logistic regression, the findings suggest that the differentiation of social stratification between families in senior high school education is embodied in student's academic attainment: Students from different classes show the significant difference in their scores acquired in entrance exam and enrollment percentage in key senior high school. The advantaged classes (such as the administrator group, the middle-manager group, and professionals and technicians group) contain significantly larger resources in economic capital and cultural capital than the disadvantaged (such as blue-collar worker group, skilled industrial worker group, and peddler group), which indirectly affects students' performance in exams: the probability of the administrator group's children to go to key senior high school is 15 times than that of the blue-collar worker family and 7.5 times than that of skilled industrial worker. A further analysis indicates

the way how family structured variables, including family's cultural capital (represented by parents' educational attainment and their reading activities), economic capital (represented by the family income per capita, studying resources, and household spending on education) affect the academic achievement. As the family's monthly income increases every ten thousand RMB, the opportunity of entering the key senior high school increases 0.33 times; the chance for children from families with high-quantity of cultural capital to go to key senior high school is 6.9 times as that of children from families with low-quantity cultural capital and 4.172 times than that of children from families with middle-quantity cultural capital. Children whose fathers are members of Democratic Parties or the Communist Party of China have 2.342 more times to enter the key senior high school than children whose fathers are ordinary people (without membership of any party). Besides, the parenting style (parents' participation in children's study), which has been represented by "parents' communication factor", "parents' attention factor" and "parents' control factor", also have power to predict academic achievement between different classes. Children from the families whose parents adopt the strategy which emphasizes usual communication and interaction are more likely to go to the key senior high school, whereas children from families whose parent attach more importance to supervising children and controlling on children's behaviors. To sum up, these findings suggest that education---which is seen as the social institution for breaking one's class limit and advancing the upward mobility---has somehow leads the immobilization of the original social stratification.