

**COUNTERACTING OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES  
THROUGH THE DIGITIZATION OF EDUCATION:  
AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE  
OF THE THEORY OF SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE**

**Elena BUJOREAN**

“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava, Romania

bujorean\_elena@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

*The present paper uses the concept of “symbolic violence” to explain the causes of certain educational inequalities, including limited access to some resources, including technology. The reference to P. Bourdieu’s theory regarding symbolic violence is the theoretical framework adopted by us in order to question the principle of equity in formal education. Up to Bourdieu, the school was recognized as an institution of the reproduction of theoretical and practical knowledge. The French sociologist’s merit lies in that he proved its role in the production/reproduction of class relations, of society in its essence.*

*By revealing a series of mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction through formal education, the French sociologist, together with J. Passeron, clarified symbolic violence as a form of gentle, invisible violence, not acknowledged as such. They explain the inequalities of the academic success by cultural and motivational factors: the inequalities appear due to the fact that formal education applies the same treatment to the pupils who are not equally armed with the elements of school culture. Symbolic violence can take the form of denying access to resources or limiting the realistic aspirations of young people. Thus, e-learning platforms that require high-speed internet provide important materials and learning experiences to which not*

*all students have access. On the other hand, conservatives believe that too much emphasis is placed on these technological changes, to the detriment of other curricular innovations.*

*The paper presents not only the impact of the theory put forward by the French sociologists in their analysis of school practices characterized by exclusion, marginalisation, inequity, but also the optimizing perspective introduced by Bourdieu. It is a good idea to bring again to the attention of practitioners, researchers and decision-makers in the field of education, the problems of the reproduction in the academic area of some social and cultural inequalities; in this way, interest can be raised in assessing the impact of the educational policies destined to increasing equity in the field of education.*

**Keywords:** Bourdieu; educational inequalities; symbolic violence; digital division.

## **1. Introduction**

Pierre Bourdieu's work is an extremely sophisticated attempt at setting up a coherent theoretical framework to provide an analysis of the social world. Implicitly, his work has a critical potential, as it reveals the nature of power or of privileges in their most subtle and varied forms, and as its theoretical framework pays special attention to the agents making up the social world. Bourdieu is considered one of the representatives of the conflictualist trend in the sociology of education, alongside the French L. Althusser, Chr. Baudelot, R. Establet or the Americans S. Bowles, R. Collins, H. Gintis. He advances a theory which is critical in relation to society and the capitalist school by stating that education, formal education in particular, is no longer an agent of the social order, of emancipation and progress, but an instance by which inequalities and domination are made evident. Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of symbolic violence in order to explain the relationship between the dominators and the dominated through a form of violence which can be defined as gentle and invisible (Bourdieu, 2001). Symbolic violence is exercised without any apparent physical constraints, since it is a process based on the recognition of the ideas and values of those who dominate by the ones who are dominated, while there is no recognition of the essence of this process.

## **2. The role of the concept of “symbolic violence” in the treatment of educational inequalities**

In the educational environment, the theory of symbolic violence is based on the idea that institutionalized education plays an internal role, that of inculcating the cultural arbitrary, capable of reproducing, through education, a lasting homogeneous habitus in its legitimate receivers, and an external role, that of cultural and social reproduction. By creating the habitus, the pedagogical action acts as a power which imposes meanings (as being legitimate) which dissimulate the relation of forces; it is thus becoming an instance of symbolic violence. Consequently, it makes the relationship of domination legitimate and strong. The distance between the dominating cultural arbitrary and the arbitrary inculcated through the first education (in the family) defines this success. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) are more interested in the mechanisms of educational differentiation. They explain the inequalities of academic success by cultural and motivational factors: the inequalities appear because school applies the same treatment to the students who are unequally armed with elements of the school culture. This phenomenon manifests itself on three levels:

1. Inequality at entry. The graduates coming from classes with a small cultural or global capital go to colleges where they have a greater chance of graduating (restricted choice), attend colleges when they are older or do not attend any colleges at all (elimination without selection);

2. Inequality within the educational system. Formally, pupils and students are equal in the face of examinations, but their unequal abilities turn the privilege into merit; a true measure of their performances is relating the level of their instruction to their cultural level at the beginning of their studies (Catargiu, C., Catargiu, V., 2001, p. 76).

3. Inequality at graduation, as far as the socio-professional insertion is concerned; placement on the work market is based only in a small measure on meritocratic and market mechanisms; the institutionalized capital (the diplomas and degrees obtained) do not have as much weight as the social capital which a graduate has.

Thus, school failure seems to be rather inevitable and created by differences, exclusion, and the existing social inequalities (Jigău, M., 1998, pp. 116-121). Although considered neutral and universal, formal education favours the cultural capital of the dominating class while discrediting the culture of the dominated. The concept of “symbolic violence” also encompasses

the situation created in the absence of compatibility between the family's cultural model and the school's cultural model. Thus, the school's culture can confuse the child with respect to the values and certainties acquired while socializing in the family, in the event the school's values are quite different from the family's. The power of the educational system is doubled on the work market which rewards academic success, validating the capital of the already privileged (P. Iadicola, 1983). The impact of the cultural capital varies according to the characteristics of the educational field (Andersen, P. L., Hansen, M. N., 2012). Bourdieu distinguishes between the domains where success is heavily conditioned by talent and those in which it depends more on perseverance and effort.

Although no empiric data have been presented to directly link the pupils' weak performances to symbolic violence, both researchers and practitioners are challenged to pay more attention to the compatibility between the practices at class and institution levels and the children's primary habitus. In this way, we can understand the spirit of symbolic violence which is exercised on pupils more often by good-willing and capable teachers. Often, these teachers cannot acknowledge nor respect the cultural capital bought by the pupil. The teachers do not question their own habitus "exactly because they are caught in it and connected to it; they wear it like an outfit. They are secure in the world because the world is within them, in the form of the habitus" (Bourdieu, P., 2003, p.50). In fact, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), it is this very invisibility of the symbolic power that makes it so efficient, by mistaking the dominating habitus for the natural one and by not recognizing its arbitrary character.

In this way, the unequal social relationships are maintained not only through inefficient teaching methods, as the present-day school reforms entail, but also through the teachers' usual pedagogical actions, however dedicated these teachers are. Bourdieu describes his theory relating to symbolic violence by referring to the way in which it operates at the pedagogical action level; nonetheless, he also discusses its implications at the institutional and system levels. He always drew the attention that such practices of symbolic violence at the micro level (the classroom), or intermediary level (the school), materialized through cultural reproduction, have consequences on a large scale, in time leading to the reproduction of relationships between groups or social classes (social reproduction). Thus, the symbolic violence character of education questions the democratic character of society, especially the principle of the equality of chances. There are also other theoreticians who have conceptualized the term of symbolic violence. Webb and his team (2002) defined the term as "violence which is exercised in a symbolic rather than physical way.

It can take the form of denying access to resources, treating people as inferiors or restricting their realistic aspirations”(Webb, J., Schirato, T. & Danaher, G. ,2002, p. XVI.). We can infer that, in the educational environment, the sources of violence should not be sought only among the actors of the school itself, but also in the school climate or in educational practices or educational policies. Exercising an act of power in order to systematically restrict someone’s attainability of a higher level of development, the expression of their own humanity, ignoring different abilities and interests, all these are ‘harmful effects of repression” (Stuart, H., 2000). Symbolic violence can take the form of denying access to resources or limiting the realistic aspirations of young people. Thus, e-learning platforms that require high-speed internet provide important materials and learning experiences to which not all students have access.

In his contemporary discourse on social progress, Şoitu, L. (2001, p.16) remarked the avoidance of acknowledging such processes as: the escalation of society’s polarization, the influence of technologies on the growing cultural discrepancies among people, the artificial proliferation of consumer needs and availabilities through advertising and economic strategies. Renouncing solidarity rules is also, in this author’s opinion, another instance of the aggressiveness of indifference which could explain the exacerbation of violent manifestations in children and teenagers.

### **3. Implications of the theory of symbolic violence in the analysis of school practices**

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory led to a series of studies focused on the interpretation of the differences between the pupils’ habitus and the habitus specific to the school environment as a source of inequality. The lack of awareness of this phenomenon is an expression of symbolic violence. Stephen Conway (1997) and Irene Kleanthous (2014) have investigated the way in which the family’s capital mediates the choice of schools by the pupils. The authors show that, unlike middle-class pupils or pupils coming from immigrant families, the indigenous pupils seem to have that “sense of the game” when they choose the schools they will attend for their higher education, which involves anticipating the way in which their habitus will be adjusted to the needs and opportunities within the social field.

Using the analysis of the critical incidents in an ethnographic study in a middle school, Herr, K., & Anderson, G. (2003) tried to capture the mechanisms of symbolic violence as they were described by Pierre Bourdieu in “Reproduction” and in his subsequent works. Their

analysis underlines the connection between social inequalities and the forms of symbolic violence in schools. The discrepancy between the children's academic results in areas with small incomes and their counterparts in the neighbouring schools threatened the legitimacy of a privileged "exemplary" school and brought to light instances of the practice of symbolic violence in schools (Herr, K., Anderson, K., 2003, 415-433).

Another category of studies uses the concept of symbolic violence to analyse the impact of imposing the culture of the majority from the perspective of the disavowal of ethnic and linguistic differences in schools (Iadicola, P., 1983; Shannon, A., & Escamilla, K., 1999; Ehrensall, K. N., 2001; Cruz, V., 2008; Monzo, L. D., 2013). Although the analysis of critical instances is seldom associated with Bourdieu's work, the theory of symbolic violence suggests that this method is useful for the study of the invisibility of symbolic violence.

The conceptual framework offered by the theory of symbolic violence led to a series of studies which illustrated practices of inequality and exclusion in the educational system. For instance, the studies which have examined the exclusion of certain groups and the reproduction of power through the study of mathematics, brought to light several practices which limit the success of some disadvantaged groups in this curricular area (Apple, M., 2000; Zevenbergen, R., 2001; Jorgensen, R., 2011; Nolan, K., 2012; Jorgensen, R., Peter G, Roper, V., 2013).

Thoshalis, E. (2012) showed in an ethnographic investigation carried out in a high-school in Boston the way in which the characteristics and functions of the trainee teachers' discourses about the care for the pupils can operate in certain circumstances as an instrument of social reproduction. Unlike the "aesthetic care," the "authentic care" is based on the historical and political knowledge and understanding of the conditions and attitudes facing the marginalized pupils in state schools. The care which was manifested only for the pupils' results in tests and following the rules reveals a superficial care. Authentic care implies the manifestation of certain high expectations for the academic success for all pupils. The study stresses that the rhetorical care applies to the archetype of the teacher seen as a saviour, using the deficit discourse in order to underline the pupil's need to be cared for, which ultimately causes symbolic violence by ignoring the responsibility, blocking opportunities and allowing for carelessness towards socio-political inequalities. Whereas the middle-class children in the central schools are prepared to cope with the post-industrial society by focusing on the development of creativity, of the ability to make informed choices and on entrepreneurship, the suburbs schools seem to teach their pupils to accept marginality (Sernhede, O., 2011, p. 170). The Swedish researcher asserts that an

implicit contract is established between teachers and pupils, making the pupils no longer questioning the position of the school and of the teachers, in exchange for lenient treatment. Therefore, like in a well-directed show, the pupils act in order to satisfy the teachers' need for appreciation and recognition and to satisfy their immediate interest of security and comfort. This state of affairs is described by Bourdieu as symbolic violence, since the educational system makes the well-established trajectories appear as free choices or as being the result of some individual merits. Revealing the symbolic violence in well-meaning societies means exposing the practices which make up structures which seem natural.

An important indicator for the insinuation of symbolic violence into the school environment is the degree of inclusion, seen as a process of reacting to the pupils' diverse needs by facilitating the participation of all pupils in the formal education and by the equal appraisal of individual particularities. We conducted a poll based on a questionnaire with a view to investigating the high-school pupils' and the teachers' opinion about the impartial character of the educational system and to identifying phenomena of marginalization, discrimination of some pupils from the categories considered non-dominating in the social field (Bujorean, E., 2016, Bujorean, E., 2017). The results of the poll based on the questionnaire carried out on a sample of 652 high-school pupils show, nonetheless, that there is trust in the ability of the educational system to invest the pupils with social and professional merits in accordance to their academic results. The financial possibilities of some pupils and their different conceptions are, more often than not, the main reasons for the marginalisation of some categories of pupils. Although the overall scores obtained throughout the whole sample indicate a favourable appreciation of the fair character of the educational system, the many comparisons made in terms of a series of independent variables indicate differences in terms of the pupils' biological gender, the living environment, the type of school the high-school pupils are enrolled in, the academic performances and the level of objective violence. In accordance with the data obtained, 15.5% of pupils consider that marginalization among schoolmates is quite frequent due to limited financial possibilities, while 5.5% of the respondents appreciate this form of violence as being very frequent. While most teachers state that there is an admission of the differences in the cultural background in the case of some pupils, a high percentage (63.2%) of the teachers questioned argue that there have not been taken special measures to eliminate these barriers. In the teachers' opinion, no structural changes have yet been put in place in order to make the school environment more stimulating and fair for all pupils, irrespective of their socio-cultural

background. The school as an institution has the power to legitimate both the knowledge and the persons (Pierrot, A., 2005), and, when certain persons are not symbolically acknowledged as legitimate, this attitude of inferiority can be internalized by these pupils. The children from the non-dominating categories enter a symbolic system which do not provide them with a continuity of their world into the outside world; it is thus possible to accentuate their feeling of estrangement in the educational world. Therefore, it is important for the school practices to adapt to the pupils' cultural environment, and not the other way round. The child's education should become part of the teacher's conscience if we want the pupil to internalize the school culture.

#### **4. Conclusions and perspectives of reducing educational inequalities**

The cultural capital is a key component in the practice of symbolic violence because our struggle for a cultural capital in a certain area does not distract us from a more productive project: the likely attempt to change the social stratification and the hierarchies of power which we let dominate us in a certain social area. In the field of education, for instance, the cultural capital is used in the fight for success and educational opportunities. Although these symbolic forms of academic success can be later turned into economic capital, we cannot look at success and educational opportunities from a merely economic perspective. Actually, an educational system based on meritocracy masks the connection between education and economy, insisting on the fact that the individual worth lies at the basis of the educational symbolic success. The harsh reality – representing a form of symbolic violence in schools (Scott, B., 2012, p. 533) – is that not all pupils are endowed with the same cultural capital needed to benefit from educational opportunities in order to achieve academic success.

In order to reduce the phenomenon of symbolic violence characteristic to the educational system, teachers and others with the ability to make decisions in education are challenged to meditate on several protective factors:

- Acknowledgement of bi-psycho-sociocultural diversity at the level of textbooks and lessons. Just as different studies have proved the nondiscriminatory character can be limited by the presence of nationalistic ideologies, the ignorance of the problems of power and social privileges, as well as by adopting positions of equality for cultures and civilizations (following

the principle of cultural relativity), the perpetuation of certain stereotypes and prejudices pertaining to gender and ethnicity.

- The awareness of barriers raised by differences between the cultural environment of the school and that of the families of the students, as well as the adoption of certain measures to overcome those.
- Promotion of inclusion through: assurance of a safe, accessible environment, through involving students in decision-making processes, through equal support for all students in structuring certain high aspirations of educational achievement, the gratification of efforts for all students, the discouragement of negative attitudes towards students from underprivileged backgrounds, supporting students from atypical families.
- The training of teachers towards a socioconstructive approach to learning and towards supporting various cultural groups. The initial and continuous training of teaching staff should take into consideration the widening of the skill set, by attaching sociocultural skills. The availability and the ability to value the students' cultural background are desirable attitudes of a teacher in the face of the risk of social exclusion.

If, indirectly, the school contributes to the maintaining of social inequalities, the teachers can turn it into an arena for positive social change. The training of the teaching staff involves the development of empathy towards the pupils of all socio-cultural categories, as well as of the willingness to act towards a change in the social field. Even if the teachers' situation is frustrating in that they perceive a series of tendencies of society's social reproduction and a series of barriers imposed by the habitus of certain groups of pupils, they must make an effort to instill in their pupils the sense that change is possible. The schools can provide educational opportunities to change the pupils' life experience and open up opportunities for all the young people, especially those put in a disadvantageous position by their precarious socio-economic status and marginalized by cultural differences.

With a view to reducing educational inequalities, the education system must ensure that every child or young person has the opportunity to benefit from existing educational opportunities in order to develop basic intellectual skills. We are necessarily witnessing the expansion of these basic skills and knowledge. The incorporation of technological skills would prevent the "digital division" (Jonnaert, P., 2010, pp.29-30), in fact a new social frontier. It refers to the growing gap between those who benefit from information technology and have the skills to use it, and those who either do not have access or are unable to use it effectively. In the current

educational context caused by the health crisis, a considerable amount of information is accessible through the main media channels. However, the capacities for access, processing and assimilation of this flow of information remain unequal, depending on the social group to which they belong. This digital division is the cause of a second fracture, the cognitive fracture, as a significant part of the information conveyed by information technology is not accessible to everyone. Consequently, the popularization of e-learning strategies will create a genuine learning without borders, in which learning opportunities will be available to anyone, anywhere, at any age, overcoming cultural or technological barriers.

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