

Digital Learning Divides: Exploring the Role of Social and Cultural Capital in Online Education

Himangshu Sekhar Sarma, Research scholar,
Department of Sociology,
Cotton University, Assam
Nabanita Bharadwaj, Research scholar,
Department of Sociology,
Cotton University, Assam
Dr. Indrani Sarma, Assistant Professor,
Department of Sociology,
Cotton University, Assam

Abstract

Online learning has emerged as a key component of education system in this age of digital revolution. India has achieved significant progress in expanding access to high-quality education, boosting elementary school enrollment and lowering the rate of dropouts through online education. However, the real potential of online education rests in its capacity to be universally accessible, dismantling obstacles and fostering an environment that is genuinely inclusive. The interplay of many inequalities causes variations in student's access to, usage of, and attitudes toward Information and Communication Technology (ICT). As a result, students from low-income families, single-parent households, rural areas and marginalized linguistic, religious and ethnic groups are especially vulnerable. Against this background, the present study critically investigates how various dimensions of social and cultural capital embedded in the family, school and peer contexts influence the educational expectation of children. In order to achieve this, the socio-economic background of students, technological experiences have been investigated in a qualitative manner. It also provides further understanding of the ways in which the digital divide interacts with larger power structures in society.

Keywords- *Education, family, digital inequality, socio-cultural capital*

Introduction

Online learning has become a vital part of the education system in this digital age. India has made notable progress in expanding access to quality education, increasing elementary school enrollment, and reducing dropout rates. To enhance teaching, learning, and assessment methods, as well as to improve access for underprivileged groups, the New Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) has recommended the use and

integration of technology in teacher training. To support digital initiatives like DTH channels, smart schools, and virtual classrooms, the Samagra Shiksha programme has been aligned with NEP 2020. In recent years, online education has proven to be the most effective alternative to traditional classroom instruction in mitigating the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown on students' academic achievements. However, the true potential of online education lies in its ability to be universally accessible, breaking down barriers and promoting a genuinely inclusive environment. Many students face difficulties in learning due to shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate instructional resources, temporary classrooms, and other challenges. Besides a student's skills and effort, their family background also influences their access to educational resources in the competition for learning opportunities. The unequal access to cultural, social, and economic resources among different socio-economic groups inevitably affects the educational resources available to children (Fan, 2014). Additionally, poverty remains one of the biggest barriers, with children from lower socio-economic backgrounds nearly five times more likely than those from wealthier families to not attend primary school. Digital inequality tends to widen when children with disabilities and members of ethnic and religious minorities are left behind (UNICEF, 2020).

Understanding Digital Gaps in Education

Given the growing prevalence of ICT in the field of education, there is a concern that digital inequality would worsen already existing social inequalities. In the state of Assam, many people, particularly in rural areas, low-income households, and people in impoverished states, lack smart phones and internet access. A lack of access to computers and smart phones, inadequate internet connectivity, and a lack of technical understanding among students, instructors, and guardians have caused many students and teachers to lag in obtaining and delivering education. According to Pratham Education Foundation & ASER Centre (2020), only 52.4 per cent of students in government schools' own smart phones compared to 78.3 per cent of students at private schools. Given the increasing dependence on online education and the persistent digital divide, it becomes essential to investigate how various social and cultural contexts shape students' access to and engagement with digital education. Even while online learning has the potential to be inclusive and accessible, students' experiences vary based on their socio-economic status, family environment and community identity.

Against this background, this study critically investigates the disparities in academic performance among students and intends to determine how different

aspects of social, economic and cultural capital ingrained in the peer, school and home contexts affect children's expectations for their schooling. The study also comprehends the interconnected relationship between socio-cultural and economic capital in the form of the growing gap in technology use, knowledge, and access among primary school students of Udalguri district of Assam. Numerous challenges that students from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds encounter while utilizing digital technology for learning are anticipated to be made clear by this study. To achieve this, various social, economic, and cultural aspects, including the socio-economic background of students, technological experience have been investigated qualitatively.

Objectives of the Study

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how digital inequality interacts with social and cultural structures, this study adopts an exploratory, qualitative approach. With the aim of revealing the complex ways that social and cultural capital impact educational experience in the digital age, the study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine how family, school, and peer contexts shape children's access to and use of online education.
- To explore the role of socio-economic status in influencing students' technological experience and educational expectations.
- To understand how the digital divide reflects and reinforces broader social inequalities based on class, caste and ethnicity.

The following research questions have been developed to guide the investigation and provide insight into the complex relationship between digital access, social and cultural capital, and educational outcomes:

- How does family background (economic, cultural and social capital) influence children's participation in online education?
- In what ways do school and peer networks impact students' engagement with online learning platforms?
- How does digital inequality intersect with broader structures of social exclusion, such as poverty or marginalization based on class, caste or ethnicity?

Methodology

The study uses a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences, challenges and expectations of students as they navigate the digital education

landscape. The methodology is designed from a sociological perspective involving both primary and secondary sources of data. The secondary data has been collected from newspapers, journal articles, and various reports. The fieldwork for the study has been conducted at three primary schools of Udalguri district, namely, Bineswar Brahma Lower Primary School, Pub-Jamuguri Lower Primary School, and Amala Boro Lower Primary School. Most of the students in these schools belong to the Bodo-Kachari tribal community. To explore the nuanced experiences of digital education among various stakeholders, this study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. Interviews were conducted with three key groups: primary school students, their parents or guardians, and teachers. For students, the questions focused on understanding their daily engagement with online learning. They were asked how they attend classes (using a phone, computer, or with help from others), who supports them at home during digital learning, and what they like or dislike about online classes. Students were also asked to share any difficulties they face, such as issues with internet connectivity, lack of access to devices, or emotional stress when they are unable to attend classes. Further, they were encouraged to talk about their dreams and aspirations and reflect on whether they feel their current education especially in the online format is helping them achieve those goals. The interviews also aimed to capture their perceptions of whether their peers have similar or different online learning experiences.

For parents and guardians, the interview questions were designed to assess the level of digital access within the household and the kind of academic support children receive at home. They were asked whether their child had access to a smart phone, computer, or reliable internet connection, and if any adult in the family could assist with online learning. Further, they were asked to share their aspirations for their child's future and their perception of the fairness and inclusiveness of the digital learning process. Their responses provided insight into how socio-economic and cultural factors influence educational support at home.

Interviews with teachers offered another layer of understanding about the broader systemic and pedagogical issues in digital education. Teachers were asked about their experience of conducting online classes and the specific challenges they encountered, especially while teaching students from rural, economically disadvantaged, or marginalized backgrounds. Collectively, these interviews aimed to uncover the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and technological factors that shape educational experiences and expectations in the context of growing digital inequality.

From Classroom to Class Structure: Education as Socio-cultural Reproduction

Social scientists have used the concept of capital to understand the mechanisms that shape people's life chances and community well-being (Lin, 2000). The introduction of various types of capital, such as social, cultural, and symbolic capital, was pioneered by Bourdieu (1986), who transformed the concept of capital by bringing it alongside the economic capital of Marx. He offers insights into the social world and class system, arguing that the objective structure of unequal capital distribution is the cause of social inequality. Social capital is the total of available or prospective resources associated with long-term networks that may or may not be founded on institutionalized relationships of acceptance and respect for one another (Ibid.). Social and cultural capital, according to Lareau & Weininger (2003), is a significant contributing factor to educational disparity. Putnam (2002) suggests that 'inside the walls' social capital refers to the networks that exist within schools, while 'outside the walls' social capital refers to the networks that connect schools to the larger community. For instance, in higher education, the relationships between students are crucial to their academic success and advancements in their educational levels and contribute to raising their aspirations. An average student's aspiration will undoubtedly rise if he or she makes connections with smarter students. Social ties and relationships with families and communities outside of the classroom are also crucial for academic success.

Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (1977) looks at the social mechanisms that produce and sustain social reproduction and allow for the upkeep of a classed society. Since the educational system is founded on the standards and expertise of the upper classes, he believes it is essential to legitimize current social structures and class relations. Children who are familiar with the dominant culture are given preference by the educational system's 'apparently neutral attitude', which reflects the power dynamics in society at large. This is primarily due to linguistic and cultural competence, as well as the relationship of familiarity with culture that can only be created by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture (ibid.). He claims that the inequalities in the competition for cultural and financial capital are reflected in the hierarchies that exist within the educational system. The hierarchy of the social world is established in the educational system, according to Bourdieu (1989, 1984). Families with varying socio-economic backgrounds develop distinct thought and reasoning systems, or what Bourdieu calls *habitus*, which are ways of seeing the world and a person's mental structure that support social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1989). Because it serves as a foundation for understanding and accepting the lessons taught

in the classroom, the habitus that are mostly formed in the home is significant. Blau & Duncan (1967) and Lerner et al. (2009) suggest that children's learning attitudes and academic achievement goals are significantly influenced by the socio-economic status of their families. Because they possess greater socio-cultural capital, children from higher socioeconomic classes have more resources for development and are more likely than their working-class counterparts to succeed in school, secure successful jobs, and earn high salaries. Disparities in educational achievement can be linked to varying degrees of social capital that are created within the networks and relationships of the families served by the school. For example, the ideals that inspire students to reach higher goals and the proper school climate are examples of how social capital promotes educational success. Thus, school, community, and family social capital all have a significant impact on students' development (Acar, 2011).

This indicates that children from less affluent families, who perceive schools as strange and frightening places, are not receiving any compensation from the educational system for their lack of these competencies. Students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, therefore, have a harder time adapting to the school environment, achieving undesirable academic outcomes, and having fewer aspirations for their future. Because students from families with high educational attainment, wealth and social standing succeed more in schools and in the workplace, the educational system thus contributes significantly to the maintenance of social inequality by sustaining social stratification patterns and preserving their inherited positions of authority. According to Goldthorpe (2007), social reproduction is thus assured by the transfer of parental capital to their children as well as by the passive function of an educational system that prevents social change. Cultural capital is passed down naturally from the family to the school for children from higher socio-economic classes (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital is acknowledged and rewarded by teachers in subtle ways. For example, they interact more effectively with students who have more cultural capital and even perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than students who lack those (DiMaggio, 1982). Children from less privileged families, on the other hand, are less fortunate in the educational system since they do not have as much cultural capital at home.

Findings of the Study

Recent studies on social reproduction of education show that educational disparities that benefit the wealthier classes and deepen the gap between them and the unprivileged segments of society are still being transmitted at an increasing rate. According to Van Dijk (2005), the concept of inequality does not originate from the

character of individuals or certain collectives or systems. Rather, this concept of inequality is predicated on person-to-person connections, relationships, exchanges, and transactions. Digital inequality is therefore a social problem rather than a technical one.

Socio-Cultural Capital and the Reproduction of Inequality

Social inequality based on socio-economic status, gender, and ethnicity can all be made worse by digital inequality. Accessing and using digital technology may be considerably more difficult for those who are already marginalized, which can exacerbate already existing social inequalities and have long-term effects on both individuals and society. In the study area, it has been noted that the students are in a disadvantaged educational situation since they lack socio-economic and cultural capital. It is found from the interviews and focused group discussions with parents that their financial situation has a detrimental effect on their children's education because they are unable to give them the necessities for online education. The absence of socio-economic capital since they lack the means to generate a good living, and no friends or social circle who are sufficiently educated to inform them of the advantages and opportunities of education. Due to their social standing, they are also unable to provide their children with appropriate socialization skills. For them, achieving upward mobility and moving up the social ladder becomes extremely challenging. The lack of high culture knowledge has always plagued the people, which have an impact on their everyday wages as well as how their children are socialized.

Their children's education is negatively impacted by their lack of financial capital, yet merely viewing their issues via an economic prism will not provide a complete picture. Thus, it is also necessary to introduce the concepts of socialization and the role of socio-cultural capital here. According to the study, stronger social resources are typically linked to the strength of network connections or locations. The lack of education in their social networks prevents them from being informed about job opportunities, skills needed in the market, or pertinent courses and academic institutions. Additionally, many are unable to comprehend the steps involved in submitting the paperwork and applying online. They can therefore be considered victims of the systemic exclusion that society has imposed upon them. The findings indicate a relationship between academic success and the material component of cultural capital as well as the inherent expression of a particular family habitus in educational opportunities. The results show that the material and social circumstances of the family had an impact on the student's academic performance. The number of resources they can devote to education and overall growth is heavily influenced

by their social background. This could be because material resources can be swiftly transformed into knowledge (by paying for private tutoring or taking an online course to supplement what is learned in school).

Digital Inequalities and Educational Expectations

The field findings show that students from less affluent families are less likely to want to pursue higher education. One of the interviewees gave a torturous and unfavorable response when asked about the prospects and chances for upward mobility in society:

“People like us, in my opinion, have little chance of moving up the social scale. The past has not been kind to us. We have been dealing with a lack of possibilities for a long time. My mother used to work as a maid, and I currently hold the same position. The poverty cycle and lack of educational opportunities have plagued us from generation to generation. But when it comes to my daughter, I have big dreams.”

The comment highlights several significant issues that the underprivileged groups face. Their issues have a universal tone since they are like those that many minorities around the world deal with. Their poverty and backwardness have been continuously reproduced throughout society, maybe with historical roots in Marx’s economic determinism theory. We cannot overlook the social placement of minorities, even while economic infrastructure may be the source of cultural replication of backwardness. It brings us to the domain of the connection between culture and education and the reasons why certain children from ‘high’ cultures are thought to be doing better in schools than children from ‘low’ cultures. Their lack of social and cultural capital both within and outside the schools is the cause of their poor academic achievement. A recurrent question concerning the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 outbreak when education was shifted to an online learning format, was asked in every interview. Nearly most of them didn’t have smart phones, and some families faced trouble in accessing teaching and learning materials because of different connectivity and electrical problems. One respondent who did not have a smart phone or access to an electricity connection at home made the following statement:

“Due to our financial situation, we were unable to purchase a smart phone during the lockdown phase. Taking notes and participating in online classes became quite difficult for me. Nevertheless, I was able to manage the reading materials from my neighboring classmates.”

According to field findings, the degree of family ties has a significant impact on the attitudes and behaviours that parents and children have toward education. Nonetheless, it is pleasant to know that the respondents have a positive outlook on education and believe that their children's education will help them escape the poverty cycle they have seen for generations. As the study shows, people invest and employ their economic, social and cultural resources to elevate their social standing. In addition to establishing the first level of digital divide between who can and cannot access the internet, an individual's capital also establishes the second level, which focuses on skills and ability to use these technologies, and the third level, which is based on the economic, social, cultural, political and personal benefits of using these technologies.

The Way Forward

Education has historically excluded several people and groups, including women, minorities and underprivileged castes and classes. Therefore, the issues of 'digital divide need to be tackled properly; otherwise, it can pose serious socio-economic implications for those who do not have access to it. The government's effort should concentrate on creating and fostering positive social capital throughout the state. Effective utilization of social capital can improve the results of the existing educational policies. Adopting policy designs that aim to stimulate latent social capital and modify current policies that erode social capital are becoming increasingly necessary for a healthy democracy to implement social policies in an effective manner. For the best results at both micro and macro levels, the government should therefore invest in social, economic, and cultural capital in addition to education. Therefore, it is crucial that policymakers who are interested in improving educational standards consider the socio-economic and cultural background of education in addition to textbooks, uniforms, and certificates. Building internet infrastructure, lowering the cost of gadgets and connections, offering literacy and digital skill training, and developing digital platforms that are accessible to all users and accommodate their various demands are all part of the effort to reduce the digital divide. Ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to access and profit from the digital world should be the goal of these initiatives.

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