

Network Diversity and Educational Inequality: A Case study of China

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Following the line of James Coleman, this paper focuses on how network diversity influences educational inequality. Social capital is positively related to one's academic performance. One way to gain more social capital is having a diverse social network as we can access to various kinds of social capital from network members who have different social backgrounds. Disadvantaged groups tend to have a less diverse social network. However, if students from a disadvantaged group have a less diverse educational support network, then why would some of them still be able to achieve academic success, such as attending an elite university? This study examines the case of students from both disadvantaged and advantaged groups in China as an example to answer the above question.

In the summer of 2008, we conducted in-depth interviews with 30 undergraduate students from two of the most prestigious universities in China – Peking University and Tsinghua University. Twenty were rural students, and the other 10 urban. By comparing the educational support networks of these two groups we discovered that the educational support network of rural students is generally larger than that of urban students. This is because rural students face more barriers than urban students and their network members are less able to provide them with resources, so they need more supporters than urban students in their journey to elite colleges. This indicates that rural students do not get enough help from the state and therefore have to rely on their own resources to achieve academic mobility.