

The Role of Education in Social Mobility: A Systematic Literature Review of Structural and Cultural Barriers

Hikmat

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

Email: hikmat@uinsgd.ac.id

Abstract

This article presents a systematic literature review that investigates the role of education in promoting social mobility while examining the structural and cultural barriers that hinder this process. Education has long been regarded as a critical pathway for individuals to improve their socioeconomic positions, yet its effectiveness is often constrained by unequal access and persistent cultural norms. By synthesizing findings from prior studies, this review identifies key structural obstacles, including economic disparities, limited educational resources, and policy shortcomings that perpetuate inequality. At the same time, it highlights cultural barriers such as gender roles, ethnic biases, and societal expectations that restrict individuals from fully benefiting from educational opportunities. The review employed a systematic search across major academic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature. A total of selected studies were analyzed based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, enabling the extraction of thematic insights. The findings demonstrate that both structural and cultural dimensions interact in complex ways to shape educational outcomes and mobility trajectories. This article contributes to sociological discourse by offering a critical synthesis of existing research while identifying gaps for further investigation. The review underscores the necessity of holistic approaches that address both structural inequalities and cultural dynamics in order to enhance the transformative power of education in advancing social mobility.

Keywords: *Education, Social Mobility, Structural Barriers, Cultural Barriers, Inequality.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Education has long been identified as a fundamental driver of social mobility by enabling individuals to transcend the socioeconomic status into which they were born (Brown, Reay, & Vincent, 2013). Research shows that educational attainment serves as a critical mechanism for upward movement across generations, as it provides individuals with the necessary human capital to compete in the labor market (Holmlund, 2023). In the United States, the expansion of education has significantly enhanced opportunities for mobility, particularly among men across different cohorts (Breen, 2010). While access to education has broadened, inequalities persist because of variations in school resources and systemic structures (Blanden, Doepke, & Stuhler, 2022). Studies consistently highlight that higher levels of education are strongly associated with improved occupational status and income compared to parental backgrounds (Sawhill & Morton, 2007). Evidence indicates that academic performance in early educational milestones, such as GCSE results, serves as a reliable predictor of long-term life chances and overall well-being (The Guardian, 2024). The sociological framework known as the Origin–Education–Destination model illustrates that while education can promote equality, it often simultaneously reproduces existing inequalities depending on structural contexts (Triventi & Passaretta, 2024). Education is also central in shaping individual aspirations and opportunities, particularly in societies characterized by stratification and intergenerational constraints (Brown et al., 2013). International research highlights that disparities in educational attainment frequently mirror broader social inequalities, such as income, ethnicity, and gender,

which directly influence the degree of mobility achieved (Blanden et al., 2022). The accumulation of skills through education not only enhances individual productivity but also strengthens the broader economy, thereby linking personal advancement with societal progress (Holmlund, 2023). At the same time, evidence suggests that policies designed to expand access to higher education can mitigate, though not eliminate, entrenched patterns of inequality (Breen, 2010). This dual role of education both as an equalizer and as a reproducer of inequality underscores its complex influence on mobility (Triventi & Passaretta, 2024). The literature clearly establishes that education is indispensable in enhancing mobility, yet its transformative capacity remains conditional on equitable access and structural fairness (Sawhill & Morton, 2007). Altogether, these insights confirm that while education is a central factor in social mobility, it operates within systemic limitations that must be critically addressed (Brown et al., 2013).

Social mobility constitutes a central concept in sociology, referring to the movement of individuals or groups within a stratified social structure across generations or within a lifetime (Grusky, 2011). Classic sociological theories conceptualize mobility as both vertical and horizontal, distinguishing between intergenerational and intragenerational patterns of movement (Ganzeboom & Treiman, 2003). Recent scholarship emphasizes that mobility is not merely about economic outcomes but also encompasses cultural and symbolic capital that shapes life opportunities (Savage, 2015). A comparative study on cross-national patterns of mobility indicates that welfare regimes, institutional structures, and cultural contexts deeply influence the degree of openness in social hierarchies (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018). Moreover, sociologists highlight the critical role of education as the principal mediating factor between family origins and occupational destinations, illustrating the classic Origin–Education–Destination (OED) framework (Breen & Müller, 2020). At the same time, inequality of opportunity persists even in societies with expanded access to education, where family background remains a strong predictor of occupational attainment (Torche, 2015). Studies show that upward mobility tends to be higher in societies with egalitarian policies and robust public institutions, while rigid class structures reinforce downward mobility risks (Blanden, 2013). The sociology of stratification also examines how race, gender, and ethnicity intersect with class, producing multidimensional barriers that influence individual trajectories (Chetty et al., 2017). Research in developing contexts has expanded mobility studies by demonstrating that cultural norms and community dynamics play equally significant roles alongside structural determinants (Hertel & Groh-Samberg, 2014). These insights collectively underscore that social mobility is a multifaceted construct shaped not only by economic resources but also by cultural, political, and institutional dynamics that vary across societies (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018). The sociological perspective frames mobility as a dynamic interaction between individual agency and structural constraints, thereby situating education, labor markets, and policy within a broader discourse on inequality and social justice (Savage, 2015).

Education plays a pivotal role in reducing social and economic inequality by expanding access to opportunities that enable individuals to transcend inherited disadvantages (Torche, 2015). Studies show that societies with higher educational attainment levels often experience lower levels of income inequality, as education functions as a major equalizer of life chances (Barone & Ruggera, 2018). The expansion of public education systems has historically contributed to narrowing class-based disparities, especially when policies promote universal access and quality learning environments (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). Evidence from cross-national analyses demonstrates that countries with more equitable education systems tend to exhibit higher rates of intergenerational mobility, indicating the capacity of education to weaken the persistence of inequality across generations (OECD, 2018). Research highlights that investments in early childhood education significantly reduce long-term disparities by equipping disadvantaged children with foundational skills critical for future achievement

(Heckman, 2011). Empirical findings also indicate that access to tertiary education is associated with greater income stability, professional employment, and improved health outcomes, all of which contribute to the reduction of inequality at the societal level (Marginson, 2016). Comparative studies show that the redistributive effects of education are strongest when combined with inclusive welfare regimes and progressive educational policies (Blanden, 2013). Evidence from developing countries suggests that educational access not only improves economic outcomes but also enhances social inclusion and civic participation, thereby addressing multiple dimensions of inequality simultaneously (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Sociologists argue that education generates cultural capital and social networks that help marginalized groups integrate into broader social structures, reducing exclusionary practices that reproduce inequality (Coleman, 1988). Longitudinal research reveals that the narrowing of educational attainment gaps between genders has significantly reduced labor market inequalities, highlighting education's transformative role in advancing equity (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Structural reforms such as scholarships, affirmative action, and financial aid programs further illustrate that targeted educational interventions mitigate socioeconomic divides effectively (Attewell & Lavin, 2007). Scholars also emphasize that the democratization of education is essential for promoting fair competition in labor markets, ensuring that talent rather than background determines individual success (Goldthorpe, 2016). Education contributes to societal stability by reducing polarization and fostering greater cohesion, which in turn diminishes the risks associated with entrenched inequality (Putnam, 2000). International organizations increasingly stress that achieving sustainable development goals requires expanding inclusive and equitable education to break cycles of poverty and inequality (UNESCO, 2020). The accumulated evidence establishes education as one of the most powerful instruments for addressing social and economic inequality globally (OECD, 2018).

Structural barriers significantly restrict the capacity of education to function as a true engine of social mobility by reinforcing pre-existing inequalities (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). Limited access to quality schools often mirrors residential segregation, with disadvantaged families disproportionately concentrated in underfunded districts that perpetuate inequality across generations (Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016). Persistent disparities in school funding and resource allocation reflect broader socioeconomic inequalities, where affluent communities provide superior opportunities compared to marginalized groups (Ladd & Fiske, 2011). Evidence from comparative studies demonstrates that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds frequently encounter limited access to advanced coursework, trained teachers, and extracurricular resources essential for competitive advancement (Sirin, 2005). Higher education also reflects structural exclusion, as rising tuition fees and declining financial aid disproportionately affect low-income students, constraining their ability to access transformative educational pathways (Marginson, 2016). Research confirms that stratified systems of education, particularly those with early tracking mechanisms, reinforce inequalities by allocating children into rigid pathways that often reproduce rather than mitigate disadvantage (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006). Educational policies that emphasize meritocratic selection without addressing systemic inequalities can inadvertently privilege advantaged groups while deepening structural barriers (Lucas, 2001). Labor market structures further intensify these challenges, as degrees obtained from less prestigious institutions often yield lower economic returns, amplifying the cumulative effects of structural stratification (Rivera, 2015). Geographic disparities also shape educational outcomes, where rural and peripheral regions typically lack infrastructure, digital access, and institutional support compared to urban centers (Zhang & Lu, 2019). Research shows that intergenerational wealth transfers allow privileged families to provide private tutoring, test preparation, and cultural enrichment, thereby securing educational advantages that remain inaccessible to others (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018). Inequality also manifests in access to digital technologies, creating a digital

divide that limits disadvantaged students from fully engaging with contemporary education systems (van Dijk, 2020). Comparative international studies reveal that educational reforms aimed at expanding access have often failed to address entrenched structural disparities, resulting in mobility gaps that remain persistent across cohorts (Chmielewski, 2019). Scholars emphasize that structural barriers are not only economic but institutional, as bureaucratic inefficiencies and policy fragmentation hinder equitable distribution of resources (Gamoran, 2010). Structural challenges therefore produce cumulative disadvantages that constrain the potential of education to equalize opportunities, thereby reinforcing cycles of inequality (Owens et al., 2016). The literature ultimately demonstrates that dismantling these barriers requires systemic interventions that combine equitable resource allocation, inclusive policies, and institutional reforms to ensure that education fulfills its promise as a mechanism for social mobility (Breen & Jonsson, 2005).

Cultural barriers critically influence the capacity of education to promote social mobility by embedding persistent norms, values, and practices that shape access and achievement (Bourdieu, 1986). Research shows that cultural capital, including language, social codes, and behavioral expectations, is unequally distributed across social classes, which often disadvantages students from marginalized backgrounds in educational settings (Lareau, 2011). Evidence highlights that differences in parenting styles and home learning environments reinforce educational inequalities, thereby sustaining social immobility (Cheadle, 2008). Gender norms remain a pervasive barrier in many societies, where restrictive expectations limit girls' educational participation and hinder their long-term mobility opportunities (Unterhalter, 2005). Ethnic and racial stereotypes also constrain academic trajectories, as prejudiced perceptions influence teacher expectations and student self-concept (Steele, 2010). Studies further emphasize that linguistic diversity can act as a cultural barrier, since students who speak minority languages often face structural disadvantages within education systems dominated by majority languages (García & Kleifgen, 2010). Intergenerational transmission of cultural norms also plays a role in limiting educational aspirations, as children from low-income families may internalize modest expectations shaped by parental experiences (Evans, Kelley, Sikora, & Treiman, 2010). Peer culture and social stigma reinforce these barriers, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be labeled as underachievers, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies that perpetuate inequality (Jackson, 2013). Comparative studies illustrate that in contexts where cultural hierarchies intersect with class, ethnicity, or religion, education becomes less effective as a tool for upward mobility (Reay, 2010). Migration and refugee studies confirm that cultural displacement often results in disrupted educational pathways, with long-term effects on mobility prospects (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Scholars also point out that meritocratic ideals embedded in educational institutions may obscure systemic cultural biases, creating the illusion of equal opportunity while privileging dominant cultural groups (Stevens, 2007). Research demonstrates that cultural expectations regarding early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and gendered labor markets reduce the educational attainment of young women in many developing societies (Hewett & Lloyd, 2005). Faith-based norms and traditional practices in certain communities can further restrict educational participation, especially when formal education is perceived as conflicting with cultural or religious identities (Park & Niyozov, 2008). Findings consistently suggest that cultural barriers do not operate in isolation but interact with structural constraints to reinforce cycles of disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, addressing cultural barriers alongside structural reforms is crucial for ensuring that education can genuinely enhance social mobility (Lareau, 2011).

Existing research has provided substantial insights into the relationship between education and social mobility, yet important gaps remain in the literature that justify the need for further systematic inquiry (Torche, 2015). Previous studies often focused predominantly on structural barriers such as income inequality and educational stratification without integrating

the cultural dimensions that also shape mobility outcomes (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018). Scholars have highlighted that while cross-national comparisons of intergenerational mobility exist, many of these analyses concentrate on Western contexts and underrepresent developing societies where cultural and structural barriers may differ significantly (Breen & Müller, 2020). Evidence suggests that interactions between structural constraints and cultural norms are insufficiently theorized, leading to an incomplete understanding of how education mediates mobility under varying social conditions (Jackson & Evans, 2017). Research has also pointed out that empirical investigations tend to isolate economic factors while neglecting how values, norms, and identities affect the transmission of advantage or disadvantage (Savage, 2015). Another limitation is the dominance of quantitative approaches that measure mobility in terms of income and occupation but fail to capture qualitative dimensions such as aspirations, social capital, and cultural belonging (Lareau, 2011). Scholars argue that this narrow focus reduces the explanatory power of existing models and overlooks important mechanisms of inequality reproduction (Lucas, 2001). Comparative literature further reveals inconsistencies in the operationalization of key concepts, which makes it difficult to draw generalizable conclusions about the role of education across societies (Blanden, 2013). The lack of attention to intersectionality, especially the interplay between class, gender, and ethnicity, represents another critical omission that limits the comprehensiveness of mobility studies (Chetty et al., 2017). These research gaps collectively demonstrate the need for a systematic literature review that synthesizes evidence on both structural and cultural barriers in order to generate a holistic understanding. The present study therefore aims to integrate diverse perspectives and provide a balanced assessment of how education shapes mobility in varied contexts. The objective is not only to identify the extent to which structural and cultural factors impede or facilitate educational benefits but also to highlight the theoretical and policy implications of these dynamics. This systematic review further seeks to map inconsistencies in previous findings, clarify conceptual ambiguities, and establish directions for future scholarship. The analysis intends to advance sociological knowledge by situating education within a multidimensional framework of inequality that accounts for institutional, cultural, and individual-level processes (Breen & Müller, 2020). The ultimate goal is to offer a critical synthesis that can inform policies designed to enhance social mobility and reduce inequality through education (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018).

B. METHOD

The present study employed a systematic literature review method designed to synthesize and critically evaluate existing scholarship on the role of education in social mobility with specific attention to structural and cultural barriers. A comprehensive search strategy was applied across multiple academic databases to ensure that relevant studies were captured from diverse disciplinary perspectives. The process began by identifying clear research questions that guided the review and shaped the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Keywords related to education, social mobility, inequality, cultural barriers, and structural barriers were used in various combinations to maximize the breadth of the search. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and authoritative reports published in English to maintain scholarly rigor and consistency. The time frame was set to capture contemporary debates, though foundational works were included where necessary to provide theoretical grounding. All identified publications were screened through a multi-stage process beginning with title and abstract review, followed by full-text assessment for relevance and quality. Only studies that explicitly addressed the intersection between education and social mobility were retained. To minimize bias, the selection process involved careful cross-checking of studies against the research objectives of this review. Data from the final set of studies were systematically extracted and organized into thematic categories. The analysis

focused on identifying recurring patterns, conceptual frameworks, and empirical findings that highlight how education interacts with structural and cultural barriers to shape mobility outcomes. Special attention was given to comparing studies across different social contexts to capture variations in educational systems and societal structures. The synthesis approach emphasized both convergence and divergence among the findings in order to highlight consistencies while also revealing contradictions in the literature. The thematic analysis was used to map the key dimensions of structural and cultural barriers and to understand their combined impact on educational effectiveness. A narrative synthesis approach was adopted to present results in a coherent and comprehensive manner. This method allowed for the integration of qualitative and quantitative studies without prioritizing one form of evidence over the other. The ultimate goal of the methodology was to generate a holistic picture of how education functions as both a pathway to mobility and a site where inequality is reproduced. The process concluded with the identification of gaps in the literature and implications for future research.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Structural Inequalities in Access to Education

Structural inequalities in access to education continue to shape patterns of social mobility by creating uneven opportunities for individuals across different socioeconomic groups. Educational institutions in many contexts remain stratified by funding levels, infrastructure quality, and availability of qualified teachers, which directly influence learning outcomes. Students from affluent families are more likely to attend schools with better facilities, smaller class sizes, and wider extracurricular options, which provide them with clear advantages in academic achievement. Children from disadvantaged households frequently encounter overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional resources, and outdated learning materials, which hinder their ability to compete on equal terms. Access to higher education is similarly influenced by financial capacity, as rising tuition costs and limited scholarships restrict opportunities for students from low-income backgrounds. Inequalities also emerge through early tracking systems that channel students into differentiated educational pathways based on socioeconomic status rather than talent or potential. These mechanisms often lock disadvantaged students into less prestigious streams that reduce their long-term mobility prospects. Urban–rural divides exacerbate structural barriers, as educational opportunities in peripheral regions are often underdeveloped compared to those in metropolitan centers. Digital inequality further amplifies structural gaps, with students lacking access to reliable technology facing disadvantages in increasingly digitalized learning environments (Hikmat, Hermawan, Aldim, & Irwandi, 2020). The persistence of these inequalities demonstrates that education, rather than functioning purely as a leveler, often reproduces existing patterns of privilege. Structural barriers also manifest in the availability of advanced coursework, enrichment programs, and mentorship opportunities that remain unevenly distributed across schools. Students who cannot access these opportunities are less prepared for competitive higher education admissions and labor market transitions. The unequal distribution of institutional support services, such as counseling and career guidance, further reinforces disparities between groups. Policy frameworks designed to standardize access often fail to overcome entrenched inequalities, leaving systemic gaps intact. The outcome of these structural limitations is a cumulative disadvantage that compounds over time, reducing the likelihood of upward mobility for marginalized groups. Education therefore reflects both its potential to facilitate mobility and its entanglement with structural inequalities that constrain this potential.

2. Cultural Norms and Social Expectations as Barriers

Cultural norms and social expectations impose significant barriers that limit the effectiveness of education as a driver of social mobility. Deeply rooted cultural values often shape who is encouraged or permitted to pursue education and at what level, thereby creating unequal opportunities across social groups. Gender expectations in many societies continue to restrict educational attainment for women, as traditional roles emphasize domestic responsibilities over formal learning. Ethnic and racial stereotypes also influence educational outcomes, with marginalized groups frequently subjected to lower expectations and reduced support from both institutions and communities. Linguistic hierarchies further disadvantage students who speak minority or indigenous languages, as they must navigate schooling systems that prioritize dominant languages. Social stigma attached to poverty or class background creates environments in which disadvantaged students internalize low expectations, which limits their aspirations and achievements. Cultural practices surrounding early marriage, child labor, or community obligations often force students, particularly girls, to abandon their education prematurely. Expectations about what constitutes “appropriate” careers for certain groups can channel students into limited pathways regardless of their abilities or interests. Intergenerational transmission of cultural values reinforces these barriers, as families pass down restrictive views of education and opportunity. Peer culture within schools can also perpetuate exclusion, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be marginalized socially, which affects both confidence and performance. Discriminatory practices within institutions reflect and reinforce cultural norms, making schools complicit in maintaining barriers rather than dismantling them. Religious traditions, when interpreted rigidly, sometimes discourage participation in secular education, limiting the prospects of those who conform to such practices. Social narratives that glorify immediate income over long-term investment in education also undermine aspirations, particularly in low-income contexts. The cumulative effect of these cultural obstacles is the creation of invisible ceilings that block the transformative potential of education. These barriers are less visible than structural inequalities but are equally powerful in shaping trajectories of mobility. Cultural norms and social expectations interact with institutional practices to maintain cycles of exclusion that education alone cannot overcome.

3. Interplay Between Structural and Cultural Barriers

The interplay between structural and cultural barriers creates compounded disadvantages that significantly weaken the potential of education to function as a pathway for social mobility. Structural inequalities such as underfunded schools, limited access to advanced coursework, and economic constraints are often magnified by cultural norms that dictate who deserves or is expected to succeed in education. Students from low-income families not only face inadequate institutional resources but also experience cultural expectations that limit aspirations and confidence. Gender roles intersect with economic barriers, as families with scarce resources may prioritize education for boys while discouraging girls from continuing beyond primary or secondary levels. Ethnic and linguistic minorities often face dual disadvantages, where structural exclusion in schooling systems is reinforced by cultural stigmatization and prejudice. Intergenerational cycles of poverty are sustained when cultural narratives normalize restricted opportunities, making structural inequalities appear natural or inevitable. Social stigma attached to class background intensifies the impact of structural deficiencies, as disadvantaged students internalize limited prospects and disengage from learning. The lack of inclusive curricula compounds cultural alienation, particularly when school content reflects dominant cultural values that marginalize minority identities. Institutional policies that appear neutral may reproduce inequities when combined with cultural expectations, such as admissions criteria that favor privileged groups with greater cultural

capital. Economic constraints that prevent investment in private tutoring or enrichment activities become more damaging when cultural barriers reduce the perceived value of education. The intersection of rural disadvantage with cultural norms often results in entrenched immobility, as geographic isolation and traditional roles mutually reinforce exclusion. The digital divide illustrates this dynamic, where lack of access to technology overlaps with cultural narratives that discourage innovation and adaptation. Cultural stereotypes about intelligence or capability further exacerbate the effects of unequal resources, resulting in compounded barriers to achievement. Discriminatory practices in schools often reflect both structural policy failures and cultural biases, embedding inequality within educational institutions themselves. Over time, these overlapping disadvantages accumulate, creating multidimensional barriers that hinder upward movement. The interaction between structural and cultural forces therefore reveals that mobility is constrained not by isolated obstacles but by complex systems of disadvantage.

3. Variation Across Contexts and Systems

Variation across contexts and systems demonstrates that the relationship between education and social mobility is highly dependent on national, regional, and institutional arrangements. Countries with inclusive welfare regimes and equitable educational policies often display higher levels of intergenerational mobility compared to societies with rigid stratification. Differences in resource allocation across regions create disparities in educational access, with urban centers typically offering greater opportunities than rural or peripheral areas. Policy frameworks influence the extent to which education acts as an equalizer, as some systems prioritize meritocratic competition while others emphasize redistribution and inclusion. Cultural dynamics embedded in specific societies also shape educational outcomes, with traditions, values, and social hierarchies interacting with structural arrangements. In some contexts, gender disparities are minimized through targeted policies, while in others, cultural expectations continue to restrict opportunities for women and girls. Migration and refugee situations present additional variation, as displaced populations often encounter educational systems that struggle to integrate culturally diverse students. Comparative evidence highlights that educational systems with late tracking provide more equitable opportunities, while early tracking systems exacerbate inequalities across generations. Societies with high investments in public education reduce the impact of family background, whereas those reliant on private resources amplify disparities. Regional case studies reveal that even within the same country, differences in governance, infrastructure, and social attitudes create significant variation in mobility outcomes. Global south contexts frequently illustrate that cultural barriers such as early marriage or linguistic exclusion intersect with weaker structural systems, intensifying immobility. Advanced economies demonstrate that widening access to higher education can increase mobility, yet returns on education often differ depending on institutional prestige and labor market structures. Social capital and community networks further explain why similar structural reforms yield different outcomes across cultural environments. Variation is also evident in how digitalization interacts with education, as some societies leverage technology for inclusion while others deepen the digital divide, a dynamic underscored by Indonesia's readiness (or lack thereof) to adapt its education system to Society 5.0 technology demands (Hikmat, 2022). These contextual differences show that no universal model of education and mobility exists, and outcomes are contingent upon the alignment of policies, institutions, and cultural frameworks. Ultimately, the diversity of contexts confirms that education's role in mobility must be assessed through a lens sensitive to systemic and cultural variation.

4. Persistent Gaps in Integrating Structural and Cultural Perspectives

Persistent gaps in integrating structural and cultural perspectives continue to limit the comprehensiveness of research on education and social mobility. Many studies focus narrowly on structural barriers such as income inequality, school quality, or access to higher education without considering the cultural dynamics that simultaneously shape outcomes. Cultural factors including gender expectations, ethnic stereotypes, and linguistic hierarchies are often treated as secondary issues rather than as central components of inequality. This separation produces fragmented understandings of how education functions in different societies. Research that emphasizes structural determinants frequently overlooks how cultural narratives influence educational aspirations, family decisions, and individual self-concept. Studies that focus exclusively on cultural dynamics often fail to account for the institutional frameworks and economic conditions that reinforce those barriers. The lack of integration results in analytical blind spots where the combined effects of structural and cultural barriers remain underexplored. Comparative evidence shows that mobility outcomes vary widely across contexts, yet explanations often lack multidimensional approaches that capture these complex interactions. Limited attention to intersectionality further weakens analysis, as the interplay of class, gender, ethnicity, and geography requires integrated frameworks. Existing literature also demonstrates a dominance of quantitative approaches that privilege measurable economic outcomes while neglecting qualitative aspects such as identity formation, belonging, and cultural capital. Methodological divides therefore contribute to the persistence of gaps between structural and cultural perspectives. Another gap lies in the insufficient examination of policy interventions that simultaneously address institutional inequalities and cultural barriers. Without such dual analysis, recommendations risk being partial and ineffective. These omissions reduce the explanatory power of existing scholarship and restrict the capacity of education research to inform holistic social policies. The persistence of these gaps highlights the urgent need for integrative models that recognize the interdependence of structural and cultural dimensions. Such models would not only advance theoretical development but also strengthen practical strategies for addressing inequality. The literature thus confirms that without closing these gaps, education's role in enhancing social mobility will remain constrained by incomplete and fragmented knowledge.

This study's finding that structural inequalities in access to education such as disparities in funding, infrastructure, and tracking directly impede social mobility aligns closely with recent literature that has empirically demonstrated how systemic resource disparities entrench educational inequality. Cornelius (2024) identifies structural resource deficits such as limited internet access as significant barriers to upward mobility among low-income populations, reinforcing the argument that systemic infrastructure gaps have tangible mobility consequences. Fitzgerald (2024) provides evidence across higher education contexts that factors such as institutional funding disparities and resource distribution consistently disadvantage students based on socioeconomic background, echoing our finding of resource-based inequality. Blanden (2023) synthesizes data showing persistent achievement gaps rooted in socioeconomic stratification that translate into mobility constraints over generations. Symonds (2024) further confirms through qualitative data that students from lower socioeconomic statuses encounter not only economic limitations but also institutional barriers that hinder educational progression. Terschuur (2022), examining European contexts, quantifies how parental education an indicator of structural inequality explains a substantial portion of educational opportunity gaps that in turn limit upward mobility. These studies collectively reinforce our finding that structural disadvantages in educational access remain powerful determinants of social mobility, demonstrating convergence across contexts and methodologies. At the same time, our finding offers nuance by highlighting cumulative and compounding nature of such barriers, which is less emphasized in studies focused on single

dimensions of inequality. The cumulative evidence compels a call for multi-layered policy responses that address not only surface-level access but the entrenched structures that perpetuate inequality across generations.

This study's identification that cultural norms and social expectations significantly impede educational effectiveness aligns with broader research showing how cultural capital reinforces educational inequality. L. Guzman (2024) demonstrates that cultural capital signals function as powerful markers of class status, which directly influence students' academic trajectories in stratified systems. Research from Fitzgerald (2024) indicates that societal expectations and biases shape the experiences of marginalized students, restricting their access to and success in higher education contexts. Hovestadt (2024) finds that similarity bias within social networks stabilizes educational inequality, suggesting that cultural homogeneity sustains exclusion even in mixed socioeconomic environments. Owens, Zeek, and Oye (2024) reveal that cultural identity profoundly shapes student engagement and achievement, emphasizing the need for inclusive pedagogies that embrace diverse backgrounds. OECD (2019) reports that education systems vary in their ability to integrate students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, pointing to inclusive systems as more effective in valuing diversity and enhancing mobility. These studies converge with our finding and collectively underscore that cultural norms, from class signaling and identity misrecognition to peer and institutional biases, constitute enduring barriers to educational equity. Our analysis extends this understanding by emphasizing how these cultural barriers intertwine with institutional factors to create deeply entrenched immobility. The comparative insights from these studies reinforce the argument that addressing cultural constraints requires systemic and context-sensitive educational reforms that acknowledge and counteract entrenched normative biases.

This study's observation that structural and cultural barriers interact to compound disadvantages finds robust support in recent literature that examines how these dimensions mutually reinforce educational inequality. Damyanov (2024) illustrates in the Bulgarian context how inclusive education policies falter when cultural biases and institutional inadequacies converge, particularly affecting Roma students in under-resourced schools. Abdulai (2021) demonstrates that international students encounter structural hurdles such as administrative barriers amplified by cultural dissonance, which undermines their integration and academic success. Gomelsky-Haiby (2024) provides evidence of enduring ethnic gaps in higher education access resulting from combined structural exclusion and cultural prejudices in admissions processes. Parsons (2022) highlights how rural students face doubly disadvantageous trajectories when geographic isolation intersects with cultural norms that devalue higher education as a viable path out of entrenched poverty. Kazmina et al. (2024) use longitudinal social network data to show that social capital, a culturally embedded resource, can mitigate structural inequality but only when individuals gain exposure to diverse and affluent networks, indicating that culture and structure simultaneously constrain or enable mobility. These converging findings reinforce our result that the interaction between structural deficits and cultural constraints creates deeply entrenched barriers to mobility. They also extend our understanding by demonstrating that interventions must address both dimensions together, rather than in isolation. Our findings underscore the necessity of integrative policy frameworks that simultaneously tackle institutional inequities and cultural biases. They further call attention to tailored solutions that are sensitive to specific regional and demographic contexts. This analysis enriches the discourse by situating structural-cultural interplay at the heart of inequality reproduction, offering a nuanced basis for addressing mobility across intersecting domains.

This study's finding that the role of education in social mobility varies across contexts is consistent with global comparative evidence. The Global Social Mobility Index shows that countries with equitable education systems and robust institutions achieve higher mobility

scores compared to nations with weaker systems (World Economic Forum, 2020). Research on the Great Gatsby Curve demonstrates that societies with lower income inequality, such as Nordic countries, display higher intergenerational mobility than societies with greater inequality (Corak, 2013). Comparative reforms of tracking systems reveal that the timing of student tracking shows minimal variation across countries, which suggests that some structural reforms produce similar outcomes despite contextual differences (Grätz, 2024). Studies further confirm that differences in welfare states and educational structures lead to variation in occupational mobility, highlighting the role of systemic institutions in shaping educational returns (Beller, 2006). Evidence from Europe shows that parental education explains significant portions of inequality in educational outcomes, but the degree of intergenerational persistence differs regionally, underscoring the contextual nature of mobility processes (Terschuur, 2022). These studies collectively support the conclusion that education's effect on mobility is not uniform but depends on how systemic frameworks, welfare policies, and cultural contexts interact. Our finding extends this perspective by emphasizing the need for tailored reforms that consider both institutional design and cultural conditions in each society.

This study's identification of persistent gaps in integrating structural and cultural perspectives aligns with existing scholarship that calls for more comprehensive analytical frameworks. Dupriez and Dumay (2006) demonstrate that integrated school systems reduce educational inequalities more effectively than differentiated systems, illustrating the importance of structure but implicitly suggesting the need to consider cultural context alongside institutional design. Abdulai (2021) emphasizes that structural conditions and cultural barriers interact in shaping international students' adaptation, highlighting the insufficiency of isolated analysis. Amjad (2024) argues that educational inequalities endure even when addressing structural factors unless cultural biases and generational divides receive attention. Kumar (2024) underscores that the potential of education to enhance mobility depends on addressing structural, systemic, cultural, and economic barriers simultaneously, reinforcing our finding of fragmented scholarship. Zengilowski (2023) critiques the tendency in psychological research to prioritize individual-level interventions while underestimating structural factors, illustrating the conceptual divide that similar gaps exist across disciplines. These studies collectively confirm that research often compartmentalizes structural and cultural dimensions, which limits theory development, policy relevance, and practical impact. Our findings expand this literature by asserting that integrative frameworks must be applied rigorously and reflect systemic interdependence rather than treating structural and cultural dynamics as separate domains. This analysis points to the urgent need for interdisciplinary approaches that combine sociological, educational, and psychological perspectives to capture the complexity of educational inequality and inform holistic interventions.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital transformation in education represents a complex process that reshapes teaching, learning, and social structures. The analysis shows that technology functions as a double-edged force that both enhances opportunities and amplifies inequalities. The findings reveal that the digital divide persists in multiple forms, extending beyond access to include skills, motivation, and institutional readiness. The study demonstrates that sociological perspectives are essential to capture the broader implications of educational technology. The review identifies that digitalization alters relationships between teachers and students, institutions and communities, and local contexts and global dynamics. The evidence indicates that digital transformation does not proceed uniformly across regions but reflects deep variations shaped by geography, policy, and culture. The findings suggest that unequal infrastructure and resources continue to reinforce social stratification within education. The study confirms that educational technology has the capacity to innovate pedagogy but also risks

eroding traditional forms of social interaction. The review highlights that digitalization creates new forms of governance, surveillance, and accountability within schools and universities. The findings underline that sociological inquiry is indispensable to uncover how technology reshapes power, privilege, and cultural practices. The analysis demonstrates that existing research has not sufficiently integrated sociological frameworks into the study of digital education. The review shows that much scholarship remains focused on technical efficiency, leaving equity and justice underexplored. The study establishes that global and contextual perspectives are vital to understand the uneven impact of digital transformation. The findings reveal that marginalized groups often remain excluded even when access is expanded. The study emphasizes that digital readiness must be addressed through comprehensive strategies involving policy, training, and cultural change. The evidence suggests that digital education both reflects and drives wider processes of social change. The review affirms that without equity-driven approaches, digital technologies risk reinforcing existing hierarchies. The study ultimately provides a foundation for future research that links educational technology with critical sociological theories. The conclusion asserts that digital transformation in education must be approached not only as a technical project but as a social phenomenon with profound implications for justice, equity, and inclusion.

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