

Conference Name: Teacher 2025 – International Teaching Conference, 19-20 February, Amsterdam  
Conference Dates: 19-Feb- 2025 to 20-Feb- 2025  
Conference Venue: NH Hotel Amsterdam-Zuid, Amsterdam, Netherlands  
Appears in: PUPIL: International Journal of Teaching, Education and Learning (ISSN 2457-0648)  
Publication year: 2025

Ru-Fen Luo, 2025

Volume 2025, pp. 553-562

DOI- <https://doi.org/10.20319/ictel.2025.553562>

This paper can be cited as: Luo R.F.(2025). The Middle-Class Cultivate their Children's Learning through a Bourdieu's Capital Theory Lens. Teacher 2025 – International Teaching Conference, 19-20 February, Amsterdam. Proceedings of Teaching & Education Research Association (TERA), 2025, 553-562

## THE MIDDLE-CLASS CULTIVATE THEIR CHILDREN'S LEARNING THROUGH A BOURDIEU'S CAPITAL THEORY LENS

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### Abstract

*The impact of parental class systems influences children's roles and responses in school. Social class, encompassing education, occupation, income, or work, equips parents with unequal resources and opportunities for educational engagement. Parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are often able to provide their children with more educational resources. Middle class families occupy a unique position in the spectrum of social class. They often have access to more resources than lower-income families but might not possess the extensive privileges of upper-class families. Middle class parents tend to engage actively in their children's education, leveraging their resources and knowledge to foster academic success. Parental involvement—or the lack thereof—in education can significantly affect children's school performance. These disparities undoubtedly play a crucial role in shaping children's outcomes. As an English teacher and having observed the middle class nurturing numerous learning resources for their children, the research was initiated. The study aims to explore the actual circumstances of how*

*middle class families cultivate learning for their children through the lens of Bourdieu's capital theory. This theoretical framework, which includes economic, cultural, and social capital, provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the multifaceted ways middle class parents support their children's education. Based on the research purpose, the ethnographic approach in qualitative research was adopted. Long-term participant observation, informal interviews, and teaching diaries were conducted as research methods. Findings organized that the middle class families strategically combined and adapted their economic, cultural, and social capital to provide a supportive educational environment for their children. The middle class understands the inherent limitations of their cultural capital and skillfully enhances it by accessing external resources. This highlights their nuanced and deliberate approach to using the assets they have. The implications suggest an increased awareness of how the middle class function and strategically leverage their economic, cultural, and social capital to provides assistance and resources to help their children succeed in education.*

**Keywords:**

Middle Class, Cultivate Children's Learning, Bourdieu's Capital Theory, Economic Capital, Cultural Capital, Social Capital

## 1. Introduction

Social stratification (card game) is inherently operating in certain systems (Bourdieu, 1976). The school environment is often considered unsatisfactory, and the hierarchical system amplifies social inequality in education. Diplomas have become tools for profit within the hierarchical system, rather than serving as the primary purpose of education (Cottom, 2017). Due to the hierarchical system, children have no choice in their social background, but the investment in family capital and education they endure is significant. Therefore, middle class families employ various resources and efforts to reduce discouraging risks, participate in school activities, engage in school management for experience, encourage extracurricular activities, and travel, among other strategies, to secure their own interests. Lareau (2000) in the book *Unequal Childhoods: class, race and family life* meticulously enumerates parental class shape the resources, support, and opportunities available to children, which in turn influence their academic performance, behaviour, and overall educational experience.

The middle class needs to engage in continuous and intensive work to secure its social status (Ball, 2003). In addition to safeguarding their own social class, they also strive to pursue better educational development or opportunities for their children. Nogueira (2010) cites van Zanten (2007) to explain that parents from the middle class are more inclined than other social classes to see themselves as masters of their own destiny, capable of resisting societal pressures and changing their fate. The middle class employs their “strategic capacity” to refine and intensify their children’s educational investments, involving both intensification and diversification. The additional educational investments made by middle-class families for their children include (Nogueira, 2010):

1. Choosing schools, such as obtaining information about schools (including evaluations and rankings) and distinguishing between different educational institutions.
2. Assisting with homework, participating in school activities (including educational events), and engaging in school management.
3. Hiring tutors, scheduling extracurricular activities (sports, arts, foreign language classes), enrolling in preschools, bilingual or multilingual elementary and middle schools, a practice referred to as “concerted cultivation” (Lareau, 2003).

Despite numerous studies investigating the relationship between family capital and early childhood learning (Wang, 2004; Xu, 2008; Zhu, 2013; He, 2018), there is a paucity of ethnographic research on preschools. Therefore, this qualitative study conducts Bourdieu's capital theory to explore how middle-class families cultivate their children in learning.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Definition of Middle Class**

According to OECD (2019), Middle-income class refers to households with income between 75% and 200% of the median national income. The Household Income and Expenditure Survey shows that the proportion of middle class in households is between 54% and 56%, and the main income is labor income (Lien, et al., 2022).

The median household income in Taiwan was around NT\$940,000 (approximately US\$29,002 at the current exchange rate) in 2022, based on data from the Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics (DGBAS). Households with an annual income between NT\$705,000 and NT\$1.88 million are considered middle-income households in Taiwan (Taipei Times, 2024).

### **Bourdieu's Capital Theory**

Bourdieu's capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) suggests that individuals possess different forms of capital, which can shape their positions within the social stratification structure and influence their patterns of social behaviour. Bourdieu theorized that the three types of capital are economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital refers to financial resources and material possessions. Cultural capital encompasses knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are valued by dominant social groups. Social capital consists of social networks, connections, and relationships that individuals can leverage.

## **3. Methodology**

### **Method**

The paper is a qualitative approach which used ethnographic research methods. Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or “fields” by means of intensive study of a group of people and their behaviors, social interactions, and cultural practices within their own natural environment which capture their social meanings and ordinary

activities (Brewer, 2000). It involves studying people in context, mainly making observations involves immersing oneself in a specific culture, social context, or the world of research participants to obtain a “complete and authentic” understanding of reality.

Thick description (Geertz, 1973) is used in ethnography to truly understand a culture which involves not just describing observable behaviors on the surface, but deeply exploring the cultural meanings and social contexts behind those behaviors. Thus, ethnographic research aims to capture cultural practices, which encompass everyday life, society, and symbolic processes.

This study utilizes “participant observation” (Lindeman, 1924), “informal interviews,” and “teaching diaries” as the primary sources of data collection. The data obtained are organized, coded, synthesized, and analyzed within triangulation method.

### **Participants**

Kitty, a lively six-year-old girl in Taiwan, resides with her father and mother in a cozy three-year-old building. Her father contributes to the family’s livelihood as an employed staff member in bustling Kaohsiung, while her caring mother devotes her time to homemaking. During weekends, the family delights in visits to Kitty’s grandparents’ home.

Their home is thoughtfully organized, featuring three distinct rooms. One is parents’ bedroom, another is Kitty’s bedroom, and the other one is a toy room. Kitty’s weekly routine is filled with enriching activities. She attends an after-school program from Mondays to Wednesdays. On Thursdays, Kitty eagerly participates in dance class. Kitty receives English tutoring on Friday night.

### **Positionality Statements**

I have been teaching English for approximately 10 years. Currently, I am engaged in teaching English to kindergarten students and providing English tutoring. During the process of teaching in kindergarten, the “learning disparities” is an important issue due to factors such as learners’ experiences, family backgrounds, and learning environments. Therefore, games, stories, and various teaching strategies are usually engaged in my teaching to stimulate students’ motivation. Starting to work in early childhood English education, I was introduced to colleagues who sought English tutoring by kindergarten teachers. This experience led to the initiation of my work as an English tutor, and I really want to know how parents cultivate and nurture their children. Therefore, the paper aims to explore the efforts of these parents make for their children. Participant observation, informal interviews and teaching diaries are organized in the study.

Informed consent from parents were conducted before initiating the study to respect the autonomy and privacy of the research participants and their families.

## **Data Collection**

### **1. Participant Observation**

Participant observation (Lindeman, 1924) involves actively participating and observing a specific group (e.g., a religious community, profession, subculture, or specific community) to understand their behaviours and establish a close relationship. In the study, I adopt the “observer as participant” approach (Whyte, 1994) to gain a more comprehensive understanding and gather authentic data and minimizes the Hawthorne Effect (Mayo, 1933).

### **2. Informal Interviews**

After each participant observation session, I engage in informal conversations with the subjects and their primary caregivers. These discussions involve querying the students about any questions or difficulties in class and informing their caregivers (all of them are mothers) about the day’s activities. Additionally, both before and after participant observations, informal chats are conducted to build rapport, gather additional information, and counteract potential Hawthorne Effects. I record reflections in teaching diaries, and outline focus areas and questions for the next observation.

### **3. Teaching Diaries**

Teaching diaries provide rich, first-hand accounts of observations and reflections. Recording details before and after each class, including lesson content, student performance, teacher reflections, key observations, outlines for informal interviews, and questions in teaching diaries. It serves as a detailed record of the actual teaching conditions, assisting in verifying information provided by participants and collected during the study process which are used in conjunction with participant observation and interviews to provide complementary data and a more holistic understanding.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

Bourdieu’s capital theory of economic, social, and cultural capital is organized to understand how middle-class parents cultivate their children in learning.

#### **Economic Capital**

Kitty’s family live in a three-years house, and own two motorcycles. This indicates that they possess certain material assets which are housing and means of transportation to fulfill their basic living needs. They do not have any investments; however, their income comes from father’s employed work, and the family rely on this salaried job. It indicates economic capital is

mainly composed of labor income rather than entrepreneurial profits or returns on assets. There are some story books in the bookcase, but there are more toys. Kitty shows me a new toy every time we meet. Parents let Kitty go to the after-school program on Mondays to Wednesday and hire English tutor at home to learn English. The economic capital enables them to maintain the family's current standard of living and children's learning.

### **Cultural Capital**

Kitty's parents are university graduates which indicates they possess a significant amount of institutionalized cultural capital. Kitty's mother actively assists Kitty with schoolwork, for example, checking homework and correcting test papers. She closely monitors Kitty's academic progress and performance, identifies areas where she needs additional support or guidance, and provides personalized instruction and corrections. However, parents' knowledge became limited as the academic subjects grew more advanced, and thus Kitty were sent to an after-school program and hire an English tutor. The transition to the after-school program and tutoring suggests the family is strategically managing the cultural capital at their disposal to ensure children continue receiving the support necessary for the academic success. This represents a nuanced deployment of cultural resources.

### **Social Capital**

Kitty's family do not attend any professional or educational communities. They do not volunteer in schools, either. However, Kitty's mother often perceives educational news or school activities by her friends. They discuss children's learning situations and educational issues with her friends, and exchange insights by online or virtual communities, such as LINE or FACEBOOK. These discussions help her establish a shared perception and expectations about education on social media to support and advice each other. For example, she hires tutors and find after-school program from her friends' advice. Online support groups or peer-to-peer networks help Kitty's mother better cope with the challenges in the educational process.

## **5. Conclusions and Implication**

Kitty's family possesses sufficient economic capital, including a stable income from the father's salaried job and essential material assets such as housing and transportation. This enables them to meet the family's basic living needs and invest in Kitty's education. As the academic subjects became more advanced, the limits of the parents' cultural capital became evident, necessitating the decision to enrol Kitty in an after-school program and hire a tutor to

supplement their support which demonstrates the family's flexibility and adaptability in mobilizing available cultural resources to ensure Kitty's continued academic learning. Although Kitty's family lacks extensive formal social networks within educational or professional circles, they effectively utilize their informal social connections to share information and advice about educational matters.

In conclusion, the middle class exhibits a balanced portfolio of economic, cultural, and social capital, which they strategically combine and adapt to provide a supportive environment for their children's educational development. The middle class recognizes the limitations of their own cultural capital and supplement it with external resources highlights their nuanced approach to deploying the capital at their disposal. Moving forward, the implications suggest a need for increased awareness of economic, cultural, and social capital function, with a particular focus on the middle class, a commitment to a long-term research, and a focus on deeper understanding of these different forms of capital and how they interact and shape societal development.



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