


**SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND CULTURAL CAPITAL: REFLECTIONS ON
BRAZILIAN EDUCATION** <https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2025.011-043>

João Santos da Silva Júnior¹, Franciele Del Vecchio dos Santos², Héllen de Lacerda Oliveira³, Naura Letícia Nascimento Coelho⁴, Rodrigo Gomes Abreu⁵, Rayane Emanuelle de Oliveira⁶, Carlos Henrique Miranda Jorge⁷, Graciele Almeida de Aguiar⁸, Carmerindo Miranda de Souza Júnior⁹, Rafael Aranha de Sousa¹⁰, Gabriel Alves da Silva¹¹ and Iara Aparecida Verdi de Assis¹².

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes educational inequalities in Brazil based on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, social, and economic capital, based on data from the 2023 School Census. The research uses a mixed approach, combining quantitative analysis and theoretical interpretation, to examine how socioeconomic conditions affect school performance, educational infrastructure, and teacher training. The results indicate that limited access to cultural capital negatively influences academic success, especially in more socioeconomically vulnerable regions. The North and Northeast regions, with less infrastructure and teacher qualification, stand out for the low educational performance of

¹ Specialist in Training and Management in Distance Education
PAULISTA UNIVERSITY - Caldeirão Grande
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6228-1280>

² Dr. in School Education
UNESP/Araraquara fran.delvecchio@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9021-0583>

³ Dr. in Dentistry Federal University of Pelotas
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8436-313X>

⁴ Doctorate student in Letters
UFSM
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0076-281X>
⁵ Doctorate student in Education USP - University of São Paulo
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0368-8211>

⁶ Master in Innovation and Educational Technologies
UFRN
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5035-0883>

⁷ Master in Law Educational Foundation of Fernandópolis
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3234-4559>

⁸ Master's student in Psychology
UFSM
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0804-2486>

⁹ Master's Degree in Music
UFU
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3878-4378?lang=pt>

¹⁰ Master's student in Letters
UNISC
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8930-6545>

¹¹ Master's student in Letters
UNISC
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0986-708X>
¹² Master's student in Inclusive Education (PROFEI)

UNEMAT
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2084-8092>



students. The analysis reveals that teachers with higher qualifications are able to promote more effective pedagogical practices in the transmission of cultural capital, contributing to better academic results. It is concluded that public policies focused on improving infrastructure and teacher qualification are fundamental to reduce inequalities and promote inclusive education. The study also points to the need for future investigations with qualitative approaches to deepen the understanding of pedagogical practices that could mitigate these disparities.

Keywords: Educational inequality. Cultural capital. Teacher training. School infrastructure. Pierre Bourdieu.

INTRODUCTION

Human activity is characterized by its ability to transform the world around it, shaping nature and society through the accumulation of knowledge and historical experience. Education and culture are two essential products of this transformation, reflecting the development of the different social and economic phases. More than simple tools for adapting to the environment, these dimensions play a central role in the way human beings relate to reality and project their future aspirations. As Marx (2013) points out, in the work process, human beings not only transform raw materials to satisfy their needs, but also modify themselves, creating demands, skills, and forms of social organization.

In this sense, education emerges as one of the main mechanisms of reproduction and social transformation. Beyond the mere transmission of technical or scientific knowledge, education is intrinsically linked to the formation of individuals capable of critically interpreting the world around them and, potentially, transforming it. The school, as a fundamental institution within contemporary societies, occupies a prominent place in this process. It is responsible for not only transmitting knowledge, but also for forming critical subjects, questioners of current norms and promoters of new forms of social organization. However, this role of the school, often seen as emancipating, is far from neutral. It is deeply linked to the social, economic and cultural conditions in which education is offered.

Access to knowledge, especially within the school environment, does not occur homogeneously among different social groups. The socioeconomic conditions of a society directly influence the way knowledge is produced, distributed, and appropriated by individuals. In this context, the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986; 1998) is central to understanding how social and educational inequalities are interrelated. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital, understood as the set of knowledge, skills and dispositions acquired in the family and social context, exerts a decisive influence on the success or failure of students. Students from families with greater accumulation of cultural capital tend to find it easier to adapt to the demands of the school system, while those from lower classes face barriers that limit their performance and opportunities for social mobility.

The inequality of access to cultural capital is visibly reflected in the educational trajectories and in the possibilities of social ascension of individuals. This reality is especially noticeable in countries like Brazil, where deep socioeconomic inequalities directly affect the education system. The poorest regions of the country, such as the North and Northeast, face structural difficulties that negatively impact the school performance of students, including the precariousness of school infrastructure and the insufficient qualification of teachers. In this way, the educational system often acts as a mechanism for

perpetuating inequalities, favoring those who already have access to cultural and economic capital, while excluding or marginalizing those who do not.

The present study starts from this problem to investigate how social and economic inequalities impact educational performance in Brazil, in the light of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts. Using data from the 2023 School Census, provided by the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP), the study seeks to understand how the conditions of school infrastructure and the qualification of teachers influence the development of students' cultural capital. The central hypothesis of the research is that the regional and socioeconomic disparities observed in the Brazilian educational system are directly related to the unequal distribution of cultural capital, reflecting and perpetuating broader social inequalities.

Thus, the analysis proposed in this study aims not only to describe these inequalities, but also to propose reflections on the pedagogical practices and public policies necessary to overcome them. The role of the school in the reproduction or transformation of social inequalities is one of the central themes of the contemporary educational debate, and the understanding of how cultural capital influences school trajectories is crucial for the construction of a more just, equitable, and inclusive educational system. From this understanding, it will be possible to think of educational policies that promote not only the democratization of access to education, but also the creation of conditions that allow all students to fully develop their academic and social potential.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed approach, combining the quantitative analysis of secondary data with an interpretation grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theory, especially his concepts of cultural, social, and economic capital. The objective is to verify how social inequalities impact the educational performance of students in Brazil, using data from the 2023 School Census, provided by INEP (2023).

The data used were collected from INEP's public database, which gathers detailed information on enrollment, school infrastructure and teacher training in educational institutions across the country. The selected variables include: (i) number of enrollments by socioeconomic level, (ii) availability of infrastructure (libraries, laboratories and internet access), and (iii) qualification of teachers. The selection of these variables is aligned with the concepts of objectified and institutionalized cultural capital, according to Bourdieu's theory (1986).

The interpretation of the data was carried out in the light of the works of Pierre Bourdieu, especially "Reproduction: elements for a theory of teaching" (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1975) and "The Symbolic Power" (Bourdieu, 1989). Based on these references, the study analyzes how cultural and social capital influences the school performance and educational trajectory of students, considering the regional and socioeconomic disparities observed in the data.

The concepts of habitus and educational field were also considered to understand how the school is configured as a space for the reproduction of social inequalities. The Brazilian regions were categorized to allow a comparative analysis that highlights how access to cultural capital varies according to local socioeconomic conditions.

The quantitative analysis was conducted using descriptive methods, using graphs and tables to represent the distribution of enrollments, the quality of school infrastructure and teacher training by region. The data were then confronted with Bourdieu's theoretical concepts, highlighting how the lack of access to cultural capital negatively impacts school success, especially in regions of greater socioeconomic vulnerability.

In addition, the analysis sought to relate teacher qualification with the ability to transmit cultural capital to students, observing that teachers with higher academic training tend to adopt more efficient pedagogical practices in the development of students' cultural capital.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Pierre Bourdieu dedicated a large part of his studies to understanding how social distinctions are maintained and legitimized in a symbolic way. The sociologist argues that these distinctions reinforce power relations and influence the habitus of individuals, that is, the set of acquired dispositions that shape the way they perceive the world and act in different social contexts (Bourdieu, 1990). In his theory, he highlights that cultural and social differences are reflected in everyday practices, which legitimizes inequalities and consolidates power in the hands of certain groups.

For the author, modern societies are composed of several social fields, each with its own internal rules and logics. These social "microcosms", such as the artistic, religious or economic field, function relatively autonomously, obeying specific logics that cannot be reduced to the rules of other fields (Bourdieu, 1992). The economic field, for example, is governed by the search for profit, while the artistic field was built on the refusal of this logic. In this way, the agents who work in each field must adapt to the rules and regularities of this space in order to compete and occupy positions of power.

The concept of habitus is essential to understand how social structures are internalized by individuals and how they shape their actions. The habitus is composed of perception and action schemes acquired throughout life, which guide the choices and behaviors of the subjects. According to Bourdieu (1990), habitus is the result of individual experiences and trajectories, but it also reflects the objective conditions in which the individual is inserted. Thus, the acquired dispositions allow the subject to navigate through the different social fields, occupying positions of domination or subversion, according to the specific habitus required by each field.

For Bourdieu (1996), symbolic capital is a form of capital that results from the social recognition of other types of capital, such as economic, cultural or social. When these types of capital are socially legitimized, they are transformed into symbolic capital, conferring prestige and power on their owners. Thus, social struggles do not only take place for the control of economic resources, but also for the imposition of a legitimate worldview, that is, for the definition of what is considered culturally valuable. These symbolic struggles play a fundamental role in maintaining social inequalities and reproducing power hierarchies.

CULTURAL CAPITAL AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

In the field of education, cultural capital plays a central role in explaining inequalities in performance among students. According to Bourdieu (1998), cultural capital refers to a set of acquired resources, such as knowledge, skills and forms of expression, which facilitate academic success. Families that have greater cultural capital are able to transmit these resources to their members, providing them with better conditions to understand and interpret the school world. This cultural capital, when recognized by the educational system, legitimizes the dominant cultural practices and reinforces the idea of meritocracy.

On the other hand, students from families with less cultural capital face greater difficulties in adapting to school demands. Bourdieu argues that academic success is not a purely individual or merit issue, but is directly related to cultural capital accumulated over a lifetime. In this way, cultural capital acts as a form of social distinction, determining who will be successful in the school environment and who will face barriers to achieving success (Bourdieu, 1998).

The school plays a fundamental role in the reproduction of cultural capital. Bourdieu suggests that the educational system is not a neutral space, but rather a place where the dominant cultural arbitrary is imposed and legitimized. The practices and contents that the school values correspond to the cultural capital of the dominant classes, which makes it difficult for students from less favored classes to access academic success. In addition, the

school structure itself favors individuals who already have adequate dispositions to understand the rules of the school game, increasing inequalities in performance among students.

Bourdieu (1998) observes that cultural capital manifests itself in three ways: incorporated (acquired habits and dispositions), objectified (cultural goods such as books and works of art) and institutionalized (titles and diplomas). The school especially values incorporated and institutionalized cultural capital, which reinforces the exclusion of those who do not have access to these resources since childhood.

In this sense, it is perceived that the author offers a significant contribution to the analysis of inequalities in the educational field. His theory on cultural capital and habitus demonstrates how socioeconomic conditions directly affect school performance, legitimizing existing inequalities and perpetuating social hierarchies. The school institution, by valuing the cultural capital of the dominant classes, reinforces these inequalities and limits the possibilities of social mobility for many students. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to question the impartiality of the education system and develop proposals that seek a fairer and more inclusive education.

In view of these initial reflections, it is possible to deepen the discussion by examining the social dynamics that act within the educational system and how it not only reflects, but also perpetuates existing social inequalities. According to Bourdieu (1990), the school is not limited to passively reproducing the social structure, but plays an active role in the legitimization of the dominant cultural capital. By defining what constitutes 'legitimate knowledge', the school implicitly excludes other forms of knowledge and cultural practices, generally associated with the less favored classes. This is done through the valorization of the *habitus* of students from the dominant classes, which is more aligned with school expectations.

In addition, the school values incorporated and institutionalized cultural capital, as pointed out by Bourdieu (1998), reinforcing the advantages of those who already have greater exposure to cultural assets and favorable environments for academic development. Students from higher social classes, who accumulate cultural capital from childhood, find themselves in a privileged position, while those from less advantaged backgrounds face greater difficulties in adapting to school norms.

Another crucial aspect highlighted by Bourdieu (1975) is the role of educational certifications as a form of institutionalized cultural capital. Diplomas and titles, although seen as individual merits, often reflect preexisting social inequalities, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion. Access to these credentials is often associated with the possession of economic

and cultural capital, which makes the educational system a mechanism for the reproduction of social hierarchies.

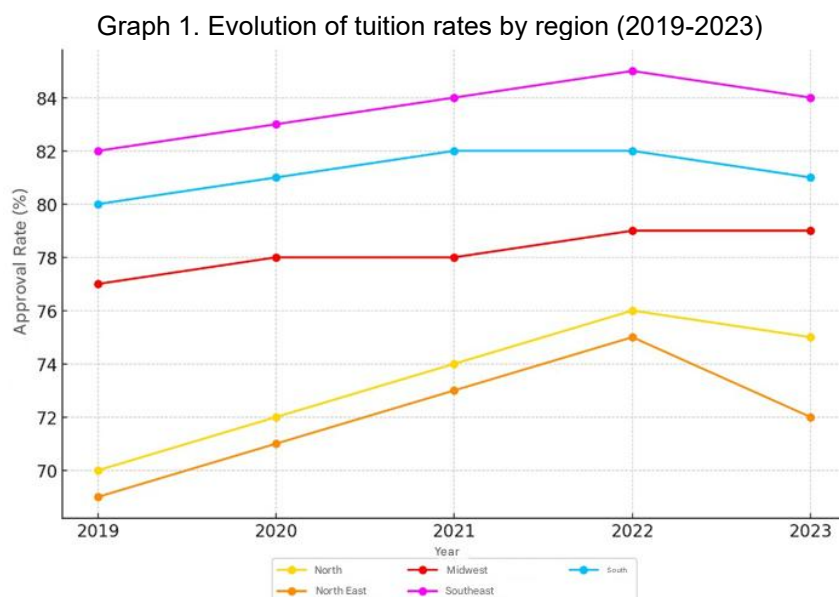
Therefore, contrary to the idealized view of a meritocratic school, Bourdieu (1990) warns us that formal education works as a tool for legitimizing social inequalities, masked by the notion of equal opportunities. To transform this reality, it is necessary to develop educational policies that combat these structural inequalities and value the cultural diversity present in society. Proposals that include more inclusive pedagogical practices and programs to support students from diverse backgrounds are essential for a more equitable education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data from the 2023 School Census, when confronted with Bourdieu's theoretical framework, reveals that socioeconomic and regional inequalities exert a significant influence on educational performance in Brazil. The data show three main axes of discussion: the socioeconomic distribution of students, school infrastructure and teacher training, aspects that are intrinsically connected to the accumulation and transmission of cultural capital.

SOCIOECONOMIC DISTRIBUTION AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Data on the socioeconomic distribution of enrollments reveal that students in vulnerable situations are concentrated in specific regions of the country, especially in the North and Northeast. In these regions, there is a higher proportion of students from families with less accumulation of cultural capital, which directly influences their school trajectories. According to Bourdieu (1998), cultural capital is a fundamental resource for academic success, and the lack of this capital in low-income families makes it difficult for students to adapt to the demands of the educational system.



Source: Prepared by the authors based on INEP (2023).

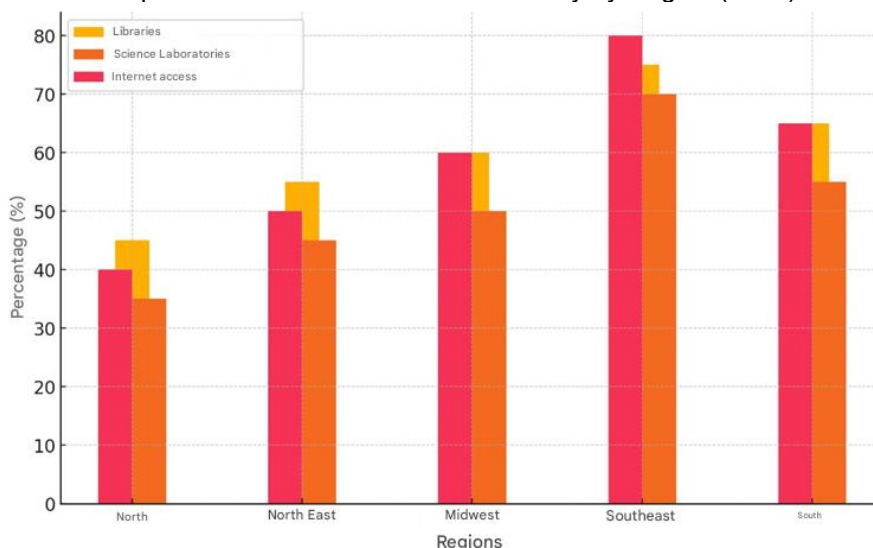
Graph 1 shows the evolution of enrollment rates by region between 2019 and 2023, highlighting the increase in enrollment in more vulnerable areas, but also highlighting the discrepancy in the conditions of access and permanence in school. Students from lower social classes, who do not have access to the cultural capital embodied at home, face greater challenges in meeting school requirements, which often results in higher failure and dropout rates.

This inequality in access to cultural capital is reflected in a cycle of exclusion that reinforces the reproduction of social hierarchies. When comparing school performance with the socioeconomic situation of students, it is noted that those from families with greater accumulated cultural capital have greater academic success. This data confirms the hypothesis that the school, instead of acting as a mechanism for social ascension, often contributes to the reproduction of structural inequalities.

SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

Another axis of analysis involves school infrastructure, which is an essential component for the development of the cultural capital objectified, according to Bourdieu's theory (1998). Graph 2 highlights the disparity in the availability of educational infrastructure, such as libraries, science laboratories, and internet access, between the different regions of Brazil.

Graph 2. School Infrastructure Availability by Region (2023)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on INEP (2023).

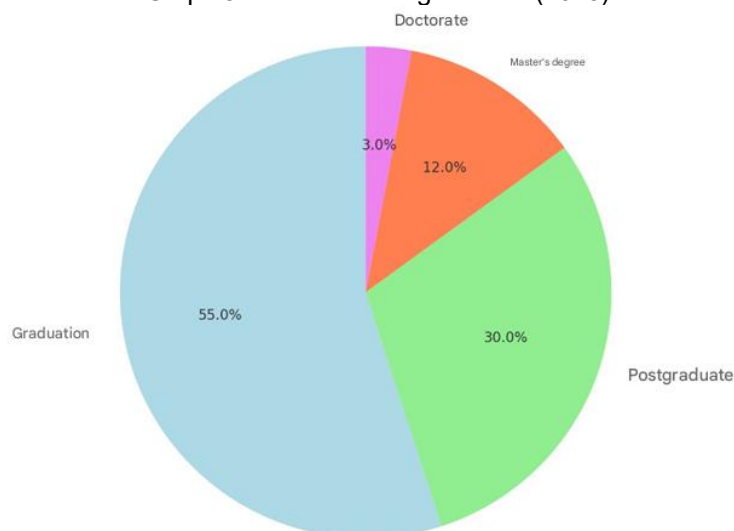
Schools located in the North and Northeast regions have a more precarious school infrastructure, with less availability of resources that facilitate the acquisition of cultural capital, such as adequate libraries and access to technology. In contrast, the Southeast region exhibits significantly better conditions, with a higher percentage of schools equipped with these resources.

The lack of infrastructure in schools in poorer regions not only limits students' access to cultural goods essential for learning, but also reduces their chances of academic success. The absence of well-equipped libraries, for example, compromises students' ability to access books and study materials, which are fundamental for the acquisition of targeted cultural capital. This reinforces the cycle of disadvantage that affects these students throughout their school trajectory, resulting in a lower performance when compared to students from regions with better educational conditions.

TEACHER TRAINING AND TRANSMISSION OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

Teacher training is a crucial factor for the transmission of cultural capital and, consequently, for the academic success of students. According to Bourdieu (1989), teachers play a fundamental role in the process of mediation between the cultural capital available at school and the cultural capital that students bring from home. Teachers with higher academic training tend to adopt pedagogical practices that favor the development of students' cultural capital, helping them to overcome the barriers imposed by their socioeconomic conditions.

Graph 3. Teacher training in Brazil (2023)

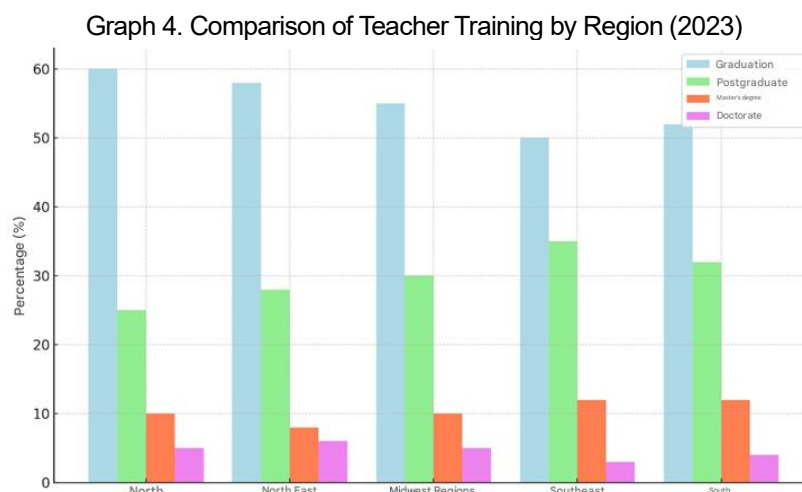


Source: Prepared by the authors based on INEP (2023).

Graph 3 shows the distribution of teacher training in Brazil in 2023. The data indicate that 55% of the professors have only an undergraduate degree, while 30% have a postgraduate degree, 12% a master's degree and 3% a doctorate. This distribution reveals a predominance of teachers with qualifications limited to the undergraduate level, which directly impacts the quality of teaching. The North and Northeast regions are the most affected, with a higher proportion of professors with only undergraduate degrees, while the South and Southeast regions have more professors with graduate and master's degrees.

This inequality in teacher training is reflected in pedagogical practices and in the ability of teachers to transmit cultural capital to students. The data reveal that schools in regions with a higher number of qualified teachers have better academic results, confirming the importance of teacher training for the promotion of a more equitable education. Well-prepared teachers are able to adapt the curriculum and use pedagogical strategies that favor the learning of students, even those from popular classes, who do not have access to cultural capital outside of school.

Graph 4 compares teacher training by region, showing that the North and Northeast regions have a higher proportion of teachers with limited training, which directly reflects the educational inequalities observed. The lack of qualification of teachers in these regions contributes to the maintenance of educational inequalities, since teachers with less training face more difficulties in adapting their pedagogical practices to the needs of the most vulnerable students.



Source: Prepared by the authors based on INEP (2023).

The results of this study indicate that the Brazilian educational system is a reflection of the broader socioeconomic and cultural inequalities in society. The analysis of data from the 2023 School Census, in light of Bourdieu's theory, reveals that unequal access to cultural capital, combined with the precariousness of school infrastructure and insufficient teacher training, perpetuates educational inequalities in the country.

These findings reinforce the need for public policies that prioritize the improvement of structural conditions in schools and invest in the qualification of teachers, especially in the most vulnerable regions. Cultural capital, as demonstrated by Bourdieu, is a crucial factor for academic success, and the role of the school should be not only to transmit knowledge, but also to provide the necessary tools for all students to develop their potential, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study analyzed educational inequalities in Brazil based on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, social, and economic capital, using data from the 2023 School Census. The research revealed how socioeconomic and regional disparities directly impact the educational trajectory of students, the quality of school infrastructure and teacher training, reinforcing preexisting inequalities in the education system.

The results show that academic success is strongly linked to access to cultural capital, confirming the hypothesis that students from families with lower socioeconomic status face greater difficulties in achieving good school performance. The North and Northeast regions, marked by inadequate school infrastructure and lower teacher qualification, stand out as the most vulnerable, evidencing the direct relationship between unequal conditions and the educational performance of students.

Based on Bourdieu's theory, it was observed that the school, although it has the potential to be a space for emancipation, often reinforces social inequalities by valuing the knowledge and practices of the dominant classes. Students from disadvantaged social groups encounter obstacles to accumulating the cultural capital necessary for school success, perpetuating the cycle of social exclusion and limiting mobility.

The study highlights the importance of public policies to reduce these disparities, with a focus on improving school infrastructure and teacher qualification, especially in the most vulnerable regions. The qualification of teachers emerges as an essential factor to promote pedagogical practices that favor the development of students' cultural capital, creating a more inclusive and equitable teaching environment.

However, it is important to recognize the limitations of this study, which is based only on quantitative and secondary data. Future studies could adopt a qualitative approach, investigating pedagogical practices and the perceptions of students and teachers about inequalities in everyday school life. In addition, the analysis could include other factors, such as local education policies and the impact of school management on reducing inequalities.

It is concluded that, in order to promote an inclusive and transformative education, it is essential to rethink pedagogical practices and educational policies, seeking to expand access to cultural capital and reduce the barriers imposed by socioeconomic inequalities. Thus, the school can become a space for emancipation and social mobility, contributing to the construction of a more just and equitable society.

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