

## The Mediating Role of Social Capital in the Relationship Between Social Class and Access to Educational Opportunities

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the mediating role of social capital in the relationship between social class and access to educational opportunities among final-year high school students.

**Methodology:** This study is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive–correlational in terms of data collection method, using structural equation modeling. The statistical population consisted of all upper-secondary students in the city of Ilam during the 2024–2025 academic year, from which a sample of 384 students was selected using multistage cluster sampling. Standard questionnaires on social capital and social class, as well as a researcher-made questionnaire on access to educational opportunities, were used for data collection. The validity of the instruments was confirmed by experts, and their reliability was established using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients (above 0.8). Data analysis was performed using SPSS and structural equation modeling tests.

**Findings:** The results of the correlation analysis indicated that social class, social capital, and access to educational opportunities are positively and significantly related ( $p < .01$ ). Regression analysis to test the mediating role showed that social class has a direct and significant effect on access to educational opportunities ( $\beta = .45$ ). Social class also had a positive and significant effect on social capital ( $\beta = .58$ ). In the final model, after including the mediator variable of social capital, the direct effect of social class on access to educational opportunities decreased but remained significant ( $\beta = .21$ ), while social capital had a positive and significant effect on access to educational opportunities ( $\beta = .41$ ). These findings indicate a partial mediating role of social capital in the relationship.

**Conclusion:** Social capital functions as a key mechanism through which the economic and cultural advantages associated with higher social classes are transformed into tangible educational opportunities.

**Keywords:** Social capital, social class, educational opportunities, educational inequality, mediating role.

## 1. Introduction

Educational inequality remains one of the most persistent structural challenges facing modern societies, and its mechanisms of reproduction have been widely documented in sociology, education, and public policy research. Over several decades, scholars have shown that unequal access to educational resources is deeply intertwined with patterns of social class stratification, beginning early in childhood and extending throughout the life course (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 2011). According to Bourdieu's theory of capital, families possess and transmit different forms of economic, cultural, and social capital, which collectively shape children's educational trajectories and ultimately reinforce existing class hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1986). Similarly, Coleman's conceptualization of social capital highlights the role of family and community networks, shared norms, and trust-based relationships in facilitating academic success, arguing that social structures can serve as resources that enable or constrain human capital formation (Coleman, 1988). Building on these foundational perspectives, a substantial body of contemporary research continues to show that educational opportunity is unequally distributed, with social class acting as a powerful predictor of students' academic outcomes, access to quality schooling, and likelihood of attending higher education institutions (Ghaffari & Naderi, 2021; Karkhaneh et al., 2024; Sirin, 2005).

Accumulated evidence demonstrates that families with higher socioeconomic status (SES) tend to provide greater educational support, secure access to high-performing schools, invest in tutoring and extracurricular activities, and leverage their networks to help their children navigate key educational transitions (Cao & Li, 2021; Lareau, 2011; Salehi Omran & Aghazadeh, 2019). In contrast, students from lower SES backgrounds often face structural disadvantages that include resource-poor schools, reduced access to information, and limited educational guidance, which inhibit their ability to compete equitably within academically selective systems (Li & Zhang, 2024; Sirin, 2005; Tavakol & Amini, 2020). Recent evidence from large-scale datasets, such as China's national college entrance examinations, demonstrates how seemingly neutral educational policies inadvertently exacerbate socioeconomic disparities, making access to prestigious universities disproportionately difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Li & Zhang, 2024). Similar processes have also been documented in Iran, where long-

standing inequalities between urban and rural regions, public and private schools, and high- and low-income households shape educational pathways, including performance on the national university entrance exam (konkur), which continues to function as a major gateway to higher education (Ghaffari & Naderi, 2021; Tavakol & Amini, 2020).

Within this broad landscape, social capital has emerged as a particularly influential factor mediating the relationship between social class and educational opportunity. Social capital—defined in terms of networks, shared norms, trust, and collective resources—forms a critical mechanism through which families transmit advantages to their children (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Putnam argues that access to dense social networks and community connections enhances children's educational engagement by providing emotional support, information channels, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Putnam, 2000). In organizational and educational settings, Nahapiet and Ghoshal emphasize the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital, each of which facilitates knowledge sharing, cooperation, and the accumulation of intellectual capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). These dimensions have been shown to shape students' access to educational information, peer support, mentorship, and the academic guidance necessary for progression through complex educational systems.

Recent empirical research reinforces this theoretical foundation by demonstrating that social capital significantly affects students' educational outcomes across cultural and socioeconomic contexts. For example, Cao and Li found that social capital and cultural capital jointly mediate the effect of SES on academic achievement among middle-school students in China, indicating that family networks and community ties help translate economic advantage into academic performance (Cao & Li, 2021). Palargas similarly reported that neighborhood social capital plays a crucial role in shaping long-term educational attainment for children from impoverished backgrounds, suggesting that supportive networks can partially compensate for socioeconomic disadvantage (Palargas, 2019). Comparative European research likewise reveals that bridging social capital—connections linking individuals to diverse social groups—contributes meaningfully to educational attainment among both immigrant and native youth (Van der Ploeg, 2020). In Iran, studies have shown that social capital not only influences students' academic achievement but also mediates broader outcomes such as social well-being, school

belonging, and pathway choices within the education system (Podineh Aghaei & Nasti Zeiai, 2025; Shariati et al., 2024).

A related body of research emphasizes that educational institutions themselves may reproduce or mitigate inequality depending on the social capital resources they cultivate. Wibowo's investigation of elementary schools shows that social capital within school communities enhances students' literacy and learning outcomes, particularly when educators foster cooperation, mutual trust, and shared learning norms (Wibowo, 2024). Meanwhile, studies in Finland examining teacher education practices demonstrate that inequalities may be reproduced through institutional ambivalence and tacit assumptions regarding human rights and equity, highlighting the indirect but powerful role that educators' social capital can play in perpetuating or challenging inequalities (Kasa et al., 2024). Within the context of virtual or digitally mediated schooling—a rapidly expanding sector in the post-pandemic era—research also shows that social capital remains essential for ensuring educational equity, especially in disadvantaged regions where technological and social resources vary widely (Shariati et al., 2024; Taraza et al., 2024). These findings suggest that social capital is not simply inherited from families; it is also shaped, strengthened, or constrained by institutional structures and practices.

Additional contemporary literature further underscores how emerging technological transformations intersect with educational inequality. For example, Rasheed et al. show that artificial intelligence (AI) can mitigate structural inequalities by facilitating personalized learning, expanding access to instructional materials, and supporting student outcomes among disadvantaged populations (Rasheed et al., 2025). Yet these advancements are not evenly distributed, as students with stronger social capital—whose families can access technology, navigate digital platforms, and supplement AI learning with social support—benefit more from such innovations than others. Thus, even in technologically advanced learning environments, social capital continues to mediate access to educational opportunities.

In the Iranian context specifically, educational inequality has deep social and historical roots. The interaction of economic hardship, regional disparities, unequal school quality, and the pressure of the national entrance exam creates a competitive environment in which students from higher social classes enjoy significant advantages (Ghaffari & Naderi, 2021; Karkhaneh et al., 2024). Qualitative studies from western provinces—such as Ilam, Kurdistan, and

Kermanshah—indicate that socioeconomic inequality adversely affects the availability of educational resources, school infrastructure, and access to supplementary learning programs, thereby widening the opportunity gap for students in these regions (Karkhaneh et al., 2024). Moreover, parental decisions regarding elite schools, private tutoring, and exam preparation programs are strongly influenced by social capital networks that circulate information about educational opportunities, institutional reputations, and strategies for academic advancement (Salehi Omran & Aghazadeh, 2019). In such contexts, social class advantages are translated into educational advantages through a web of relationships, norms, and shared expectations—precisely the processes identified by leading theorists such as Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam.

Despite significant scholarly attention to educational inequality in Iran and internationally, gaps remain regarding the precise mechanisms through which social class shapes students' access to educational opportunities, especially during critical transitional periods such as the final year of high school. While previous research demonstrates clear associations between socioeconomic status and academic achievement, more empirical work is needed to clarify the mediating role of social capital in this relationship and to assess how these dynamics operate in specific regional settings where inequality is acutely visible, such as Ilam. Additionally, although the mediating effects of social capital have been documented in several international contexts, less is known about how these processes unfold within the Iranian education system, where school selection mechanisms, the centrality of the national examination, and the influence of community networks differ from those of Western systems.

Moreover, theoretical work by Baron and Kenny provides a rigorous methodological framework for analyzing mediation effects within social science research, enabling researchers to examine both the direct influence of social class on educational outcomes and the indirect pathways through which social capital transmits advantage (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Applying such frameworks to the Iranian educational context allows for a more nuanced understanding of structural inequality and offers policymakers empirical insights for designing interventions that enhance equity. Given that previous studies suggest that investments in social capital—such as strengthening school–parent relationships, expanding mentorship networks, and developing community-based educational resources—can partially offset socioeconomic disadvantage, examining this

mediating role may provide valuable direction for educational planning and social policy (Podineh Aghaei & Nasti Zeiai, 2025; Wibowo, 2024).

Considering these theoretical, empirical, and contextual perspectives, the present study seeks to address an important research gap by empirically examining the mediating role of social capital in the relationship between social class and access to educational opportunities among twelfth-grade students in the city of Ilam. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate whether and how social capital mediates the relationship between social class and access to educational opportunities among high school students in Ilam.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is applied in terms of purpose, as its results can be used in educational policymaking to reduce inequality. In terms of the nature and method of data collection, this study falls under descriptive–correlational research and specifically employs the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach to test the conceptual model of the study. This method enables the researcher to examine the direct and indirect relationships among a set of variables simultaneously and statistically test the mediating role of one variable in the relationship between two other variables. The statistical population of this study consisted of all male and female students enrolled in the twelfth grade (final year of high school) in the city of Ilam during the 2024–2025 academic year. The reason for selecting this population is the importance of this educational stage as a transition to higher education and the crucial role of the national university entrance exam (Konkur) in determining students' academic and professional futures.

To determine the sample size, Cochran's formula for infinite populations with a 95% confidence level and a 5% sampling error was used, which estimated the required sample size as 384 students. A multistage cluster sampling method was applied to select this sample. In the first stage, 2 municipal districts in Ilam were randomly selected to ensure variation in socioeconomic status across districts. In the second stage, four high schools (two boys' schools and two girls' schools, including public and private institutions) were randomly selected from each district. In the final stage, within each selected school, students from twelfth-grade classes were randomly chosen in proportion to the required sample size, and the questionnaires were distributed among them.

### 2.2. Measures

The primary data collection instrument was a questionnaire consisting of three main sections: the first section included demographic variables and social class indicators (parents' occupation, education, and monthly income); the second section assessed social capital using the standard Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) questionnaire in three dimensions—structural, cognitive, and relational; and the third section was a researcher-made questionnaire designed to measure “access to educational opportunities,” covering dimensions such as access to quality schools, exam preparation classes, academic counselors, and educational information.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

After data collection, statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26. First, descriptive statistics (including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) were used to describe sample characteristics and the main study variables. To assess the validity of the researcher-made questionnaire, content validity was evaluated based on feedback from 10 experts in sociology and educational sciences. Reliability of the entire questionnaire and each of its dimensions was assessed through Cronbach's alpha, which yielded values above .80 for all variables, indicating satisfactory reliability.

To test the study hypotheses and examine the mediation model, hierarchical regression analysis as proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) was employed. This method includes three stages: (1) examining the effect of the independent variable (social class) on the dependent variable (access to educational opportunities); (2) examining the effect of the independent variable on the mediator (social capital); and (3) examining the simultaneous effect of the independent and mediator variables on the dependent variable. The significance of the indirect effect was assessed using the Sobel Test to definitively confirm or reject the mediating role of social capital. The significance level for all analyses was set at  $p < .05$ .

## 3. Findings and Results

In this section, the descriptive and inferential findings of the study are presented. First, the descriptive statistics of the main variables are provided, followed by the results of the correlation and regression analyses used to test the mediation hypothesis.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Main Research Variables (N = 384)*

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum Score	Maximum Score
Social Class	58.32	15.11	25	95
Social Capital	63.45	14.89	30	100
Access to Educational Opportunities	60.17	18.24	20	100

As shown in Table 1, the mean score for social class in the sample is 58.32, indicating a relatively normal distribution of the sample across social classes, with a slight tendency toward middle-class categories. The mean scores for social capital (63.45) and access to educational

opportunities (60.17) are also at moderately high levels. The standard deviations indicate acceptable variability among respondents, suitable for conducting correlation and regression analyses.

**Table 2**

*Pearson Correlation Matrix Among the Research Variables*

Variable	1. Social Class	2. Social Capital	3. Access to Educational Opportunities
1. Social Class	1	—	—
2. Social Capital	0.584	1	—
3. Access to Educational Opportunities	0.452	0.611	1

The results of the correlation matrix in Table 2 show that all three main variables have significant and positive relationships with one another. The correlation coefficient between social class and social capital ( $r = 0.584$ ) indicates that higher social class levels are associated with higher levels of social capital. Additionally, there is a significant

positive correlation between social class and access to educational opportunities ( $r = 0.452$ ), and between social capital and access to educational opportunities ( $r = 0.611$ ). The existence of these significant correlations satisfies the initial requirement for testing a mediation model.

**Table 3**

*Regression Results for Predicting Social Capital Based on Social Class*

Predictor Variable	Standardized Beta ( $\beta$ )	t	Significance Level (p)	R <sup>2</sup>
Social Class	0.584	14.21	0.000	0.341

This table presents the results of the second step of the mediation test (the effect of the independent variable on the mediator). The findings indicate that social class significantly and positively predicts social capital ( $\beta = 0.584$ ,

$p < .001$ ). The coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>) shows that approximately 34.1% of the variance in social capital is explained by social class, which is a substantial and meaningful effect.

**Table 4**

*Hierarchical Regression Results for Testing the Mediating Role of Social Capital*

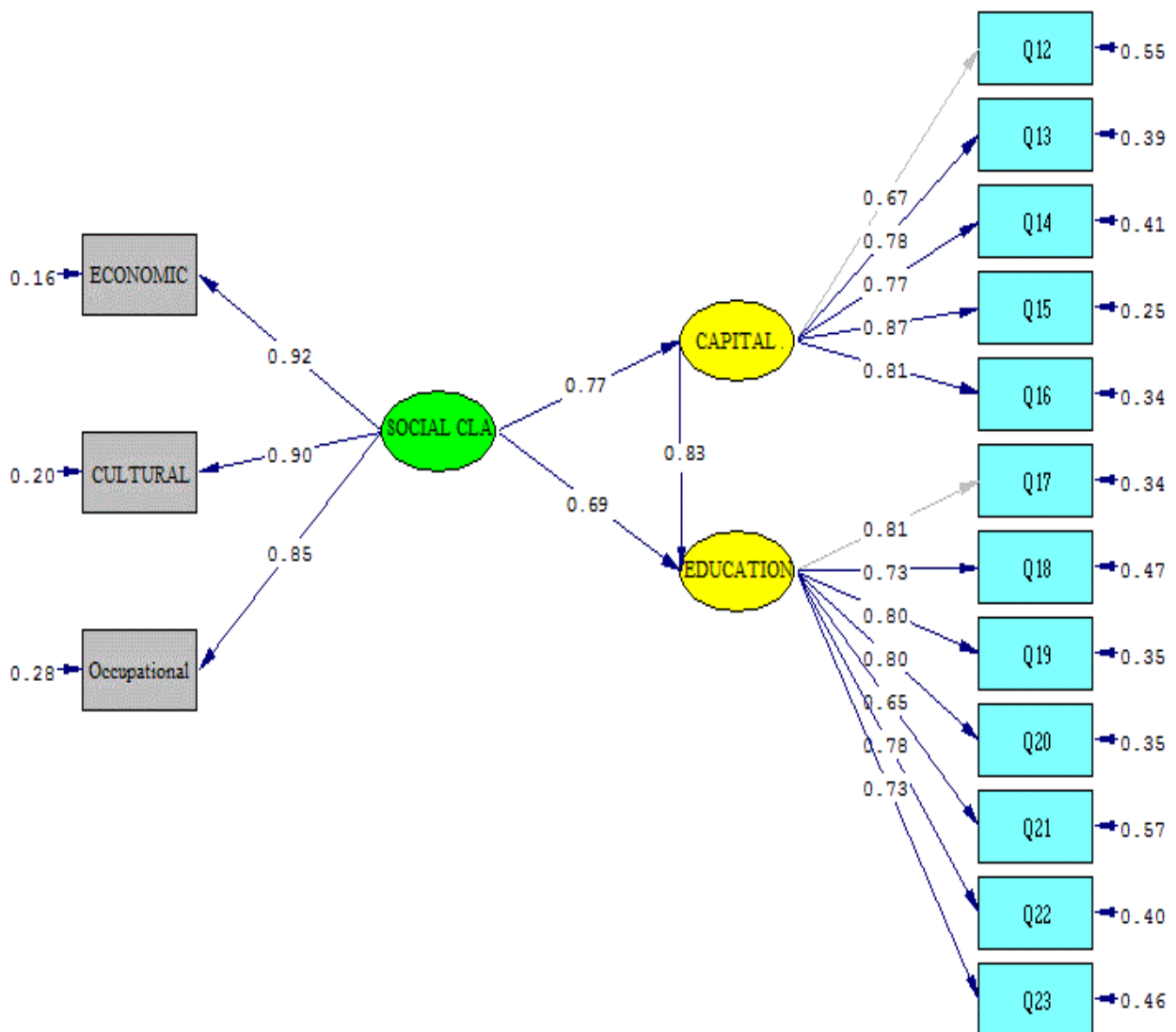
Model	Predictor Variables	Standardized Beta ( $\beta$ )	t	Significance Level (p)	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Model 1	Social Class	0.452	9.87	0.000	0.204	0.204
Model 2	Social Class	0.213	4.68	0.000	0.407	0.203
	Social Capital	0.410	9.01	0.000	—	—

This table presents the main results of the mediation test. In Model 1, social class alone enters the regression equation and has a direct and significant effect on access to educational opportunities ( $\beta = 0.452$ ). This variable alone explains 20.4% of the variance in the dependent variable. In Model 2, the mediator (social capital) is added to the equation. The findings show that upon entering social capital, the beta coefficient for social class decreases from 0.452 to 0.213, but remains significant at  $p < .001$ .

Meanwhile, social capital itself has a strong and significant positive effect on access to educational opportunities ( $\beta = 0.410$ ). The reduction in the coefficient of the independent variable after entering the mediator indicates the presence of mediation. Because the effect of social class remains significant, the mediation is classified as **partial mediation**. The Sobel Test also confirmed the significance of the indirect effect ( $Z = 8.55, p < .001$ ).

Figure 1

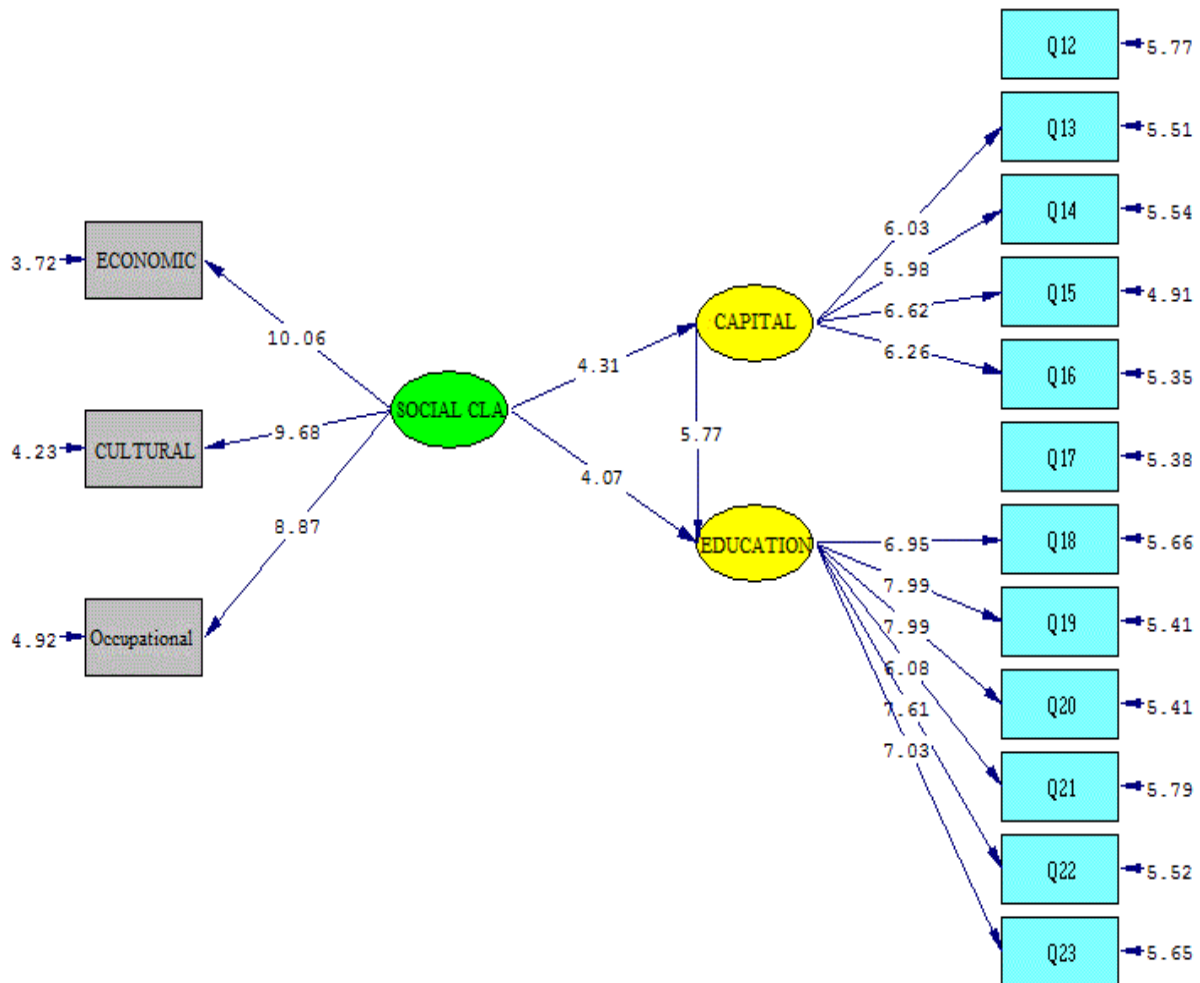
Model Significance of the Main Hypothesis Under Standardized Estimates



Chi-Square=110.36, df=87, P-value=0.00007, RMSEA=0.060

Figure 2

Model Significance of the Main Hypothesis Under Significance Coefficients



Chi-Square=110.36, df=87, P-value=0.00007, RMSEA=0.060

Table 5

Model Fit Indices for the Main Hypothesis

Fit Index	CMIN/DF	RMR	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	NNFI	IFI
Acceptable Values	< 3	< .05	< .08	> .90	> .80	> .90	> .90	> .90
Calculated Values	1.268	0.032	0.060	0.98	0.94	0.95	0.95	0.96

– The obtained IFI (Incremental Fit Index) value is 0.96, indicating desirable model fit.

– The NNFI (Non-Normed Fit Index), which should exceed 0.90, equals 0.95 for the main research model, indicating good fit.

– The NFI (Normed Fit Index) value is 0.95, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.90, confirming desirable fit.

– The AGFI (Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index), acceptable at 0.80 or higher, is 0.94, demonstrating favorable fit.

– The GFI (Goodness of Fit Index), acceptable above 0.90, is 0.98, indicating strong model fit.

– The RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) value is 0.060, below the .08 threshold, showing good fit.

– The SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual), which should be below 0.05, equals 0.032, demonstrating desirable model fit.

– The CMIN/DF value, which should be below 3 for acceptable fit, is 1.268, confirming strong model fit.

Therefore, based on all fit indices, it can be concluded that the model of the main hypothesis demonstrates an appropriate and satisfactory level of fit.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the mediating role of social capital in the relationship between social class and access to educational opportunities among twelfth-grade students in the city of Ilam. The findings clearly demonstrated that social class has a significant direct effect on access to educational opportunities, and that social capital partially mediates this relationship. This means that students from higher social classes not only have direct advantages in reaching better educational resources but also benefit from richer social networks, norms, and relationships that facilitate their access. The results align with classical and contemporary sociological theories of educational inequality, which consistently show that social class is one of the strongest predictors of educational attainment (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 2011). The present findings reinforce these arguments by empirically demonstrating how social class advantages are transformed into educational advantages through social capital.

The positive and significant relationship between social class and social capital found in the current study is consistent with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize social capital as a resource unevenly distributed across social strata. Bourdieu's theory positions social capital as a tool that privileged groups use to maintain their advantage through networks of mutual recognition and institutional connections (Bourdieu, 1986). Similarly, Coleman posits that social capital embedded within family and community structures enables parents to monitor children's educational progress, support academic behaviors, and facilitate upward mobility (Coleman, 1988). The present findings support these foundational ideas by showing that students from higher social classes possess stronger social networks, greater access to informational resources, and more effective connections that can be mobilized to enhance their educational pathways. These patterns mirror what Lareau observed in her ethnographic work on "concerted cultivation," where middle-class families actively deploy social capital to promote their children's success (Lareau, 2011). Thus, the current research contributes to a growing body of empirical evidence confirming that social capital functions as a key transmission mechanism of class-based educational advantage.

The results also revealed that social capital exerts a significant positive effect on access to educational opportunities. This finding echoes Putnam's argument that communities rich in social networks and trust provide more opportunities for information diffusion, civic engagement, and educational support (Putnam, 2000). It is also aligned with the framework proposed by Nahapiet and Ghoshal, who argue that the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital facilitate cooperation, knowledge sharing, and problem solving, ultimately contributing to better access to and utilization of resources (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In educational contexts specifically, the effects of social capital have been repeatedly documented. For example, Cao and Li found that social capital was a strong mediator between socioeconomic status and academic performance among Chinese junior high school students (Cao & Li, 2021), a result remarkably similar to that of the present study. Palargas demonstrated that neighborhood social capital positively shaped the long-term educational attainment of children from low-income families (Palargas, 2019). Likewise, Van der Ploeg showed that bridging social capital increased educational outcomes for both immigrant and native youth across Europe (Van der Ploeg, 2020). These parallels suggest that the mediating role of social capital identified in the current study is not unique to Ilam or Iran, but rather reflects broader international dynamics linking socioeconomic status, networks, and educational access.

The partial mediation found in this study—supported by Baron and Kenny's methodological framework for mediation analysis—indicates that social class influences educational opportunities both directly and indirectly through social capital (Baron & Kenny, 1986). This result highlights that structural inequality operates through multiple channels: access to financial resources, school selection strategies, private tutoring, and parental involvement, as well as through social networks, shared norms, and collective support. The fact that social class continues to exert a significant direct effect even after accounting for social capital suggests that structural barriers in the educational system cannot be fully mitigated by interpersonal networks. This insight is consistent with Sirin's meta-analytic review, which shows that socioeconomic status remains a strong predictor of academic achievement even when other mediating factors are considered (Sirin, 2005). Similarly, recent research in Iran demonstrates that socioeconomic inequality in provinces such as Ilam, Kurdistan, and Kermanshah continues to shape

access to educational resources regardless of school-level factors (Karkhaneh et al., 2024). Thus, while social capital constitutes an important pathway for accessing educational opportunities, it cannot entirely eliminate class-based disparities.

The present findings also hold significant implications for understanding the role of social capital in Iran's unique educational landscape, particularly the competitive and high-stakes nature of the national university entrance exam (konkur). Tavakol and Amini's systematic review emphasizes how social determinants—including parental education, wealth, and community networks—shape students' performance on the konkur (Tavakol & Amini, 2020). The current results reinforce this pattern by showing that students from higher social classes, who typically possess greater social capital, have more access to key educational opportunities such as quality schools, exam preparation classes, and academic guidance. Salehi Omran and Aghazadeh further illustrate how parents' social networks influence decisions about elite school enrollment, revealing how social capital is mobilized to broaden educational choices for children (Salehi Omran & Aghazadeh, 2019). The present study's empirical results align with these findings by showing that social capital not only facilitates access to formal opportunities but also shapes the informal processes of navigating the educational system—such as obtaining information, securing mentorship, and preparing for competitive exams.

Moreover, the results resonate with contemporary global discussions on how social capital interacts with technological and institutional changes in education. For instance, Rasheed and colleagues argue that technological innovations, particularly AI-based personalized learning platforms, can enhance educational equity if supported by adequate social and institutional capital (Rasheed et al., 2025). However, access to these technologies is itself mediated by family networks and community support, meaning that students with stronger social capital benefit more from such innovations. This corresponds with Shariati et al.'s findings on virtual education in Golestan Province, where the successful implementation of digital learning depended heavily on school-community collaboration and pre-existing social capital resources (Shariati et al., 2024). Similarly, Kasa et al. demonstrate how institutional practices in teacher education can inadvertently reproduce inequalities when social capital is unevenly distributed among student groups (Kasa et al., 2024). The present study adds to this growing body of literature by highlighting how social capital

remains a powerful determinant of educational access even in contexts undergoing digital and institutional transformation.

At a broader societal level, the current findings support Putnam's argument that declining social capital undermines opportunities for collective advancement and contributes to widening inequality (Putnam, 2000). In the Iranian context, Ghaffari and Naderi's review of educational inequality suggests that socioeconomic disparities are deeply embedded in both family structures and institutional arrangements, and persist despite efforts to expand educational access (Ghaffari & Naderi, 2021). The partial mediation effect found in the current study suggests that strengthening social capital could be one pathway to reducing educational inequality, although it cannot fully counteract structural barriers. This aligns with Wibowo's findings that strong school-community ties enhance student learning in primary schools (Wibowo, 2024), as well as Podineh Aghaei's research showing that social capital improves students' social well-being in school settings (Podineh Aghaei & Nasti Zeiai, 2025). These studies collectively suggest that enhancing relational and cognitive social capital within families, schools, and communities can meaningfully improve educational outcomes, even if it cannot eliminate class-based disparities.

Overall, the findings of the present study contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which social class shapes access to educational opportunities in Iran. By demonstrating that social capital partially mediates this relationship, the study highlights the importance of both structural and interpersonal resources in shaping educational pathways. The results also emphasize that policies aimed at reducing educational inequality must account for the multifaceted nature of advantage transmission, addressing not only material inequalities but also disparities in information access, community support, and social networks.

This study has several limitations. First, the use of self-reported questionnaires may have introduced response bias, as students might overestimate or underestimate their levels of social capital or access to educational opportunities. Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationship between variables. Third, the study was conducted only in the city of Ilam, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different socioeconomic or cultural conditions. Fourth, social capital is a multidimensional construct, and although the study measured three key dimensions,

additional qualitative exploration could reveal deeper insights into informal networks and cultural norms. Finally, access to educational opportunities was measured through perceptions rather than objective indicators, which may not fully capture structural disparities in school quality, resource distribution, or institutional practices.

Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to better examine how social capital develops over time and how it influences educational trajectories across multiple years. Multi-regional comparisons would help determine whether the observed mediation effects are consistent across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Mixed-methods approaches, incorporating interviews or ethnographic observations, could deepen understanding of how families mobilize social networks to navigate educational systems. Future research could also explore additional mediators—such as cultural capital, parental involvement, or school climate—to develop more comprehensive models of educational inequality. Finally, studies examining the interaction between social capital and digital learning environments would provide timely insights into how technological transformation reshapes access to educational opportunities.

Practitioners and policymakers can use these findings to design interventions that strengthen social capital within families, schools, and communities. Schools can develop mentorship programs, peer-support systems, and family-engagement initiatives to foster supportive networks. Educational policymakers can address structural inequalities by improving school resources in disadvantaged areas, expanding access to exam preparation programs, and providing targeted guidance for students with limited social networks. Strengthening collaboration among schools, families, and community organizations may help reduce opportunity gaps and create more equitable educational pathways for all students.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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