
**Representation of Educational Inequality in Contemporary Fiction Literature and Its Impact
on the Reproduction of Students' Cultural Capital**

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Purpose: The present study aimed to investigate the representation of educational inequality in contemporary fiction literature and analyze its impact on the reproduction of students' cultural capital within educational and sociocultural contexts.

Methodology: This study was conducted using a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. The participants included 36 individuals from Tehran consisting of upper secondary school students, Persian literature teachers, literary critics, and doctoral students in sociology and literature who were selected through purposeful sampling with maximum variation. In addition to semi-structured interviews, 12 contemporary Persian novels and short story collections published between 2000 and 2025 were selected for textual analysis based on their engagement with themes related to education, class inequality, social mobility, and cultural capital. Data collection tools included semi-structured interviews, textual analysis frameworks, field notes, and analytic memos. The data were analyzed using open coding, axial coding, thematic categorization, and critical discourse analysis with the assistance of MAXQDA 2024 software.

Findings: The findings revealed that contemporary fiction literature frequently represents educational inequality through symbolic and cultural mechanisms associated with language, family educational background, institutional prestige, and hidden curriculum. The themes of reproduction of cultural capital, symbolic violence, educational exclusion, and class-based identity formation emerged as dominant conceptual categories. Literary narratives often portrayed privileged students as possessing greater linguistic legitimacy, communicative confidence, and institutional adaptability, while marginalized students were represented through silence, anxiety, symbolic invisibility, and academic insecurity. Critical discourse analysis further demonstrated that meritocratic discourse within literary texts frequently conceals structural inequalities by framing educational success as an outcome of individual effort rather than inherited cultural advantage.

Conclusion: The results demonstrated that contemporary fiction literature plays a significant role in both reflecting and reproducing educational inequality through symbolic representations of language, culture, identity, and institutional legitimacy.

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1. Introduction

Educational inequality has increasingly become one of the central concerns in contemporary educational sociology, cultural studies, and literary criticism due to its profound influence on identity formation, social mobility, and the reproduction of cultural hierarchies within modern societies. In contemporary educational systems, inequality extends beyond material deprivation and institutional discrimination and becomes embedded within symbolic structures, linguistic practices, and cultural representations that shape students' understanding of themselves and their social positions. Literature, particularly contemporary fiction, plays a crucial role in reflecting and reproducing these symbolic structures because literary narratives not only portray educational realities but also participate in constructing cultural meanings surrounding success, failure, privilege, and marginalization. Contemporary fiction literature often represents schools, teachers, families, and students as symbolic actors situated within unequal social relations, thereby influencing readers' perceptions of educational legitimacy and cultural distinction. Educational narratives embedded in literary texts may normalize class inequality, reinforce dominant cultural norms, or alternatively challenge systems of symbolic domination by exposing the invisible mechanisms through which educational inequality is reproduced. From this perspective, literary discourse becomes a significant site for understanding how cultural capital is transmitted across generations and how educational identities are socially constructed through symbolic representation (Pennycook, 2017). The relationship between language, education, and cultural power has been emphasized extensively in studies of intercultural and sociolinguistic education, demonstrating that educational systems often privilege specific linguistic and cultural codes associated with dominant social groups while marginalizing alternative forms of cultural expression (Seidi et al., 2018). Similarly, studies on multicultural literacy and educational communication have shown that educational institutions frequently reproduce social inequality through implicit cultural expectations embedded within classroom interactions, language practices, and institutional discourses (Yuan, 2017). Consequently, educational inequality must be understood not solely as an economic or institutional issue but also as a symbolic and cultural phenomenon reproduced through discourse, representation, and narrative structures.

Contemporary fiction literature possesses unique sociological significance because it functions simultaneously as a reflection of social reality and as a mechanism through which social meanings are produced and circulated. Literary narratives shape collective imagination regarding educational success, intelligence, meritocracy, and social mobility by constructing symbolic images of schools, families, and students within unequal social contexts. Such representations influence readers' perceptions of educational legitimacy and contribute to the internalization of cultural hierarchies. Research on cultural identity and intercultural communication has demonstrated that language and narrative representation are deeply connected to processes of identity negotiation and symbolic belonging (Janík, 2017). Fictional narratives frequently portray educational environments as spaces where students negotiate class identity, linguistic legitimacy, and social recognition while simultaneously confronting institutional expectations and cultural norms. Studies examining multicultural identity formation further indicate that educational settings are not neutral spaces but are culturally structured environments in which dominant social values are reproduced through curriculum, communication practices, and symbolic interactions (Kondrateva & Fakhruddinova, 2016). Within such contexts, literature contributes to the normalization of educational stratification by portraying certain forms of speech, behavior, and cultural competence as indicators of intelligence and social worth. Research concerning dialect variance among high school students revealed that linguistic differences frequently shape students' social identities and educational experiences by influencing peer relationships, teacher perceptions, and institutional recognition (Nelson, 2018). These findings highlight the importance of analyzing literary representations of language and schooling because fiction literature may reproduce similar assumptions regarding linguistic legitimacy and educational competence.

The concept of cultural capital provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between educational inequality and literary representation. Cultural capital refers to symbolic

resources such as language proficiency, cultural knowledge, educational familiarity, and communicative competence that facilitate academic success and social legitimacy within educational institutions. Students from privileged backgrounds often possess greater access to culturally valued forms of expression and institutional knowledge, enabling them to navigate educational systems more effectively than students from marginalized communities. Studies on language learning motivation and sociopsychological orientation have shown that educational engagement is strongly influenced by students' cultural environment, family expectations, and perceptions of social recognition (Riaz et al., 2018). Likewise, research on community cultural wealth emphasizes that educational experiences are shaped by family resources, cultural narratives, and social expectations transmitted across generations (Ee, 2017). Contemporary fiction literature frequently represents these differences through depictions of elite schools, educated families, linguistic sophistication, and unequal educational aspirations. Such representations may contribute to the symbolic reproduction of inequality by framing educational achievement as an outcome of personal merit rather than inherited social advantage. The cultural politics of language education further demonstrate that educational systems often privilege dominant linguistic norms associated with social prestige and institutional legitimacy (Pennycook, 2017). Consequently, students lacking access to dominant cultural codes may experience exclusion, invisibility, or symbolic marginalization within educational environments. Literary texts that depict these dynamics become valuable sources for examining how educational inequality is culturally represented and ideologically reinforced within contemporary societies.

Another important dimension of educational inequality concerns the emotional and psychological consequences of symbolic exclusion within educational institutions. Students who experience cultural marginalization frequently internalize feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and anxiety due to their perceived inability to conform to dominant educational expectations. Research on socio-emotional difficulties among students demonstrated that educational environments can significantly influence students' emotional well-being, self-esteem, and social functioning (Alizadeh et al., 2018). Similarly, studies on experiential avoidance identified that individuals across different cultural contexts often suppress emotional distress and internal conflicts in order to maintain social acceptance and institutional conformity (Jean-Louis Monestès, 2018). Contemporary fiction literature frequently portrays students struggling with educational pressure, class-based discrimination, and symbolic humiliation, thereby reflecting the psychological dimensions of educational inequality. Literary representations of academic failure, silence, shame, and social exclusion reveal how educational systems may produce emotional consequences that extend beyond academic performance. Research on emotional speech recognition and cultural communication further demonstrated that cultural environments shape emotional interpretation, interpersonal interaction, and social belonging (Keshtiari & Kuhlmann, 2016). Such findings suggest that educational inequality cannot be fully understood without considering the emotional and symbolic experiences of students within institutional settings. Fiction literature provides an especially valuable medium for exploring these experiences because narrative structures enable readers to access the internal psychological realities of marginalized individuals and to observe the subtle processes through which symbolic domination becomes normalized.

The role of educational institutions in reproducing national, cultural, and ideological identities has also received considerable scholarly attention. Educational systems frequently function as mechanisms for transmitting dominant cultural values and reinforcing state-sanctioned forms of identity through curriculum design, language policy, and extracurricular activities. Historical studies of educational policy have demonstrated that schools often serve broader political and cultural objectives aimed at shaping collective identity and social conformity (Khanban, 2016). Research concerning national schools and cultural identity similarly indicates that educational institutions participate in defining legitimate forms of cultural belonging while marginalizing alternative identities and perspectives (Malinovskaya, 2017). In the context of globalization and internationalization, educational systems increasingly confront tensions between local cultural values and global cultural influences. Studies examining English language policy in higher education emphasized that language education policies significantly affect cultural identity, educational opportunity,

and social hierarchy within academic environments (Davari, 2018). Likewise, scholarship on global English and multilingual motivation demonstrated that language learning is deeply connected to cultural aspiration, identity formation, and symbolic mobility within multicultural societies (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017). Contemporary fiction literature often reflects these tensions by portraying students navigating conflicting cultural expectations, linguistic hierarchies, and aspirations for social advancement. Such literary representations reveal how educational inequality intersects with broader cultural and ideological struggles over identity, legitimacy, and belonging.

Intercultural communication studies also provide important insights into the relationship between education, culture, and symbolic inequality. Educational environments increasingly operate within multicultural contexts characterized by linguistic diversity, cultural negotiation, and social heterogeneity. Research on intercultural communication emphasized that identity is continuously negotiated through interaction, discourse, and institutional recognition (Janík, 2017). Similarly, studies on teaching intercultural communication demonstrated that educational practices significantly shape students' ability to understand cultural difference and negotiate social belonging (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017). However, unequal access to intercultural competence and communicative legitimacy may reproduce social inequality within educational settings by privileging students possessing dominant cultural knowledge and linguistic confidence. Research on multicultural communication challenges further indicated that unequal communication structures can produce misunderstanding, exclusion, and symbolic conflict within organizations and educational environments (Sudhiir & Sudhiir, 2016). In fiction literature, such inequalities frequently emerge through narrative contrasts between students from privileged educational backgrounds and those lacking access to dominant linguistic or cultural norms. Literary narratives often portray communication itself as a form of symbolic power through which students gain recognition, authority, or exclusion within academic environments. Research on multiliteracies and relational cultural teaching emphasized that education is fundamentally a relational and culturally mediated process involving symbolic interaction and meaning construction (Michelson, 2018). Therefore, examining literary representations of educational communication can reveal how symbolic inequality becomes embedded within everyday interactions, institutional expectations, and cultural narratives.

Recent scholarship has additionally highlighted the role of media, globalization, and digital communication in shaping educational and cultural experiences. Social media and intercultural adaptation studies have shown that contemporary communication technologies influence identity construction, cultural interaction, and educational aspiration by expanding access to global cultural discourses (Alamri, 2018). Educational narratives represented within contemporary literature are increasingly influenced by globalized cultural ideals emphasizing competition, individual achievement, and symbolic prestige. Research examining cultural fit and language alignment within organizations demonstrated that language practices play an important role in processes of self-regulation, identity internalization, and social acceptance (Doyle et al., 2017). Such findings are particularly relevant for understanding how students internalize educational norms and cultural expectations represented within literary discourse. Furthermore, environmental and cultural education research emphasized that educational experiences are shaped not only by institutional structures but also by broader cultural ecosystems involving social values, symbolic meanings, and collective identity (Hutcheson et al., 2018). Literary narratives contribute to these ecosystems by shaping public understanding of educational legitimacy, social mobility, and cultural worth. Cross-cultural educational studies similarly revealed that communicative strategies and cultural understanding significantly influence students' educational participation and emotional experiences within learning environments (Anggraeni & Rachmijati, 2018). Consequently, the analysis of contemporary fiction literature offers an important opportunity to examine how educational inequality is represented, normalized, challenged, or transformed within broader cultural discourse.

Despite extensive research on educational inequality, intercultural communication, and cultural identity, relatively limited attention has been devoted to examining how contemporary fiction literature contributes

to the symbolic reproduction of educational inequality and cultural capital among students. Existing studies have primarily focused on institutional policy, language education, sociolinguistic interaction, or multicultural communication, while the literary representation of educational inequality remains comparatively underexplored, particularly within the context of contemporary Persian fiction. Given the influential role of literature in shaping cultural imagination and social perception, analyzing literary representations of education can provide deeper insights into the hidden symbolic mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced across generations. Contemporary fiction literature not only reflects social realities but also participates in constructing ideological assumptions regarding meritocracy, intelligence, cultural legitimacy, and educational success. Understanding these narrative processes is therefore essential for critically examining the relationship between education, culture, and symbolic power in contemporary society. Accordingly, the present study aimed to investigate the representation of educational inequality in contemporary fiction literature and its impact on the reproduction of students' cultural capital.

2. Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design with a critical interpretive approach aimed at examining the representation of educational inequality in contemporary fiction literature and analyzing its influence on the reproduction of students' cultural capital. The qualitative paradigm was selected because the phenomenon under investigation required an in-depth understanding of symbolic meanings, narrative structures, hidden ideological dimensions, and sociocultural interpretations embedded within literary texts and participants' lived experiences. The research population consisted of secondary school students, literature teachers, literary critics, and graduate students in the fields of sociology of education and Persian literature in Tehran during the 2025–2026 academic year. Purposeful sampling with maximum variation was employed in order to achieve a broad range of perspectives regarding educational inequality, literary interpretation, and cultural capital formation. The participants included 18 upper secondary school students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, 7 Persian literature teachers, 5 literary critics specializing in contemporary fiction, and 6 doctoral students in sociology and literary studies, resulting in a total of 36 participants. Inclusion criteria consisted of familiarity with contemporary Persian fiction literature, willingness to participate in in-depth interviews, and the ability to critically discuss themes related to education and social inequality. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new themes or conceptual categories emerged from the interviews and textual analyses. In addition to participant interviews, a purposive corpus of 12 contemporary Persian novels and short story collections published between 2000 and 2025 was selected based on their explicit or implicit engagement with themes of schooling, class stratification, educational exclusion, symbolic violence, social mobility, and family cultural resources.

Data collection was conducted through multiple qualitative tools in order to ensure depth, triangulation, and interpretive rigor. The primary instrument was semi-structured in-depth interviewing, which allowed participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding educational inequality and literary representations of school culture. The interview guide was designed based on the theoretical foundations of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and social reproduction, as well as critical sociology of education and literary sociology. The interview protocol included open-ended questions concerning representations of schools and teachers in literary narratives, perceptions of social class differences in educational environments, symbolic manifestations of privilege and deprivation, family influence on educational trajectories, and the role of literature in shaping students' educational aspirations and identities. Each interview lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and was conducted either in educational institutions or university settings in Tehran. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. In addition to interviews, document and textual analysis constituted a major component of the data collection process. The selected literary works were systematically analyzed using a researcher-developed textual analysis framework focusing on narrative

discourse, characterization, symbolic structures, representations of educational institutions, linguistic markers of class distinction, and depictions of cultural practices associated with educational success or marginalization. Field notes and analytic memos were also utilized throughout the research process to capture emerging conceptual insights, contextual observations, and interpretive reflections during interviews and textual coding. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by returning selected interpretations and thematic summaries to several participants for confirmation and clarification. Furthermore, peer debriefing with two university professors specializing in sociology of education and literary criticism was used to improve analytical consistency and interpretive validity.

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis simultaneously in order to uncover both explicit thematic patterns and underlying ideological structures embedded within literary narratives and participant accounts. The analytical process followed an iterative and recursive procedure beginning with repeated reading of interview transcripts and literary texts to achieve immersion in the data. Initial open coding was conducted line-by-line to identify recurring concepts, symbolic expressions, educational experiences, and sociocultural meanings related to inequality and cultural capital. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader conceptual categories through axial coding, leading to the identification of central themes associated with educational exclusion, symbolic domination, hidden curriculum, class-based identity formation, and intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. In parallel, critical discourse analysis was applied to examine how language, narrative positioning, metaphors, and symbolic representations within literary texts contributed to the normalization or critique of educational inequality. MAXQDA software version 2024 was utilized to organize transcripts, manage coding procedures, and facilitate thematic categorization. Trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data, triangulation between interviews and literary texts, intercoder agreement procedures, and maintenance of an audit trail documenting all stages of coding and interpretation. The final analytical framework integrated sociological and literary perspectives in order to provide a multidimensional understanding of how contemporary fiction literature participates in the representation and potential reproduction of educational inequality and cultural capital among students.

3. Findings

The demographic analysis of the participants demonstrated substantial diversity in terms of educational background, socioeconomic status, academic specialization, and professional experience, which contributed to the richness and depth of the qualitative findings. Among the 36 participants, 18 were upper secondary school students studying in public, private, and gifted schools located in different educational districts of Tehran. The student participants ranged in age from 15 to 18 years, with 10 female and 8 male students included in the sample. The socioeconomic distribution of student participants reflected different levels of family cultural and economic capital, including students from lower-income households, middle-class families, and highly educated upper-middle-class families. The teacher group consisted of 7 Persian literature teachers with teaching experience ranging from 6 to 24 years. The literary critic group included 5 scholars specializing in contemporary Persian fiction and sociological literary criticism, while the final participant group included 6 doctoral students in sociology of education and Persian literature from universities in Tehran. Most participants possessed direct or indirect experiences with educational inequality, symbolic discrimination, academic stratification, or unequal access to educational resources. During the interviews, participants repeatedly referred to themes such as unequal linguistic competence, class-based educational opportunities, educational aspirations shaped by family background, hidden discrimination within schools, and the symbolic distinction reproduced through literary narratives. These experiences provided a comprehensive interpretive framework for understanding how contemporary fiction literature represents and reinforces educational inequality and cultural capital reproduction.

Table 1. Primary Themes and Conceptual Categories Extracted from Thematic Analysis

Main Theme	Subthemes	Frequency of References	Interpretive Meaning
Reproduction of Cultural Capital	Linguistic privilege, family educational background, literary taste transmission, symbolic educational resources	94	Representation of inherited cultural advantages facilitating academic success
Educational Inequality	Unequal school resources, class segregation, educational exclusion, hidden discrimination	87	Structural and symbolic inequality within educational institutions
Symbolic Violence	Internalized inferiority, humiliation in classroom settings, normalization of hierarchy	73	Invisible mechanisms legitimizing class domination
Social Mobility Anxiety	Fear of downward mobility, academic pressure, aspiration conflicts	61	Psychological consequences of unequal educational competition
Hidden Curriculum	Discipline structures, behavioral conformity, elite norms reproduction	69	Implicit transmission of dominant cultural values
Identity Formation	Self-worth linked to educational success, class-conscious identity, academic labeling	58	Educational environment shaping social identity
Resistance and Agency	Narrative resistance, critical awareness, alternative educational aspirations	44	Efforts to challenge dominant educational structures

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that the most frequently recurring theme within both interview data and literary texts was the reproduction of cultural capital, with 94 coded references identified throughout the analytical process. Participants repeatedly emphasized that contemporary fiction literature portrays educational achievement not merely as an individual accomplishment but as a consequence of inherited linguistic, symbolic, and cultural advantages transmitted through family environments. Literary narratives frequently depicted students from privileged families as possessing greater familiarity with formal language, literary expression, institutional expectations, and academic communication styles, which provided them with invisible advantages in educational settings. The second dominant theme concerned educational inequality, reflected in 87 coded references associated with unequal school facilities, differentiated educational opportunities, and class-based exclusionary practices. Participants explained that literary texts often represented schools as spaces where social hierarchy becomes normalized through access to resources, teacher expectations, and symbolic markers of prestige. The theme of symbolic violence emerged strongly in both participant interviews and textual analysis, demonstrating how humiliation, silence, and internalized feelings of inadequacy are subtly reproduced in educational environments without explicit coercion. The analysis further revealed that contemporary fiction literature portrays educational institutions not only as centers of knowledge transmission but also as mechanisms for reinforcing dominant cultural norms and reproducing social stratification. Themes related to hidden curriculum and identity formation illustrated how students gradually internalize social classifications and develop class-conscious educational identities shaped by institutional expectations and cultural representations. Although less frequent, the theme of resistance and agency demonstrated that some literary works also portray students and marginalized individuals as capable of questioning dominant educational structures and seeking alternative forms of cultural recognition and empowerment.

Table 2. Narrative Patterns of Educational Inequality in Selected Contemporary Fiction Works

Narrative Pattern		Number of Literary Texts Identified	Dominant Narrative Representation	Sociological Interpretation
Elite Representation	School	9	Schools as symbols of prestige and social distinction	Institutional reproduction of dominant class culture
Marginalized Narratives	Student	11	Students experiencing exclusion, silence, and educational failure	Structural educational deprivation
Family-Based Advantage	Academic	10	Educated families facilitating school success	Intergenerational transfer of cultural capital
Teacher Expectation Differences	Bias and	8	Differential treatment based on class background	Symbolic reinforcement of inequality
Educational Competition and Anxiety	Competition	7	Psychological pressure linked to academic success	Internalization of meritocratic ideology
Language and Cultural Codes	Language and Cultural	12	Formal language associated with legitimacy and intelligence	Linguistic capital as symbolic power
Resistance to Institutional Norms	Institutional	6	Students challenging dominant educational structures	Emergence of critical agency

The narrative analysis shown in Table 2 demonstrates that language and cultural codes constituted the most dominant narrative pattern identified in the selected literary corpus, appearing in all 12 analyzed literary works. The findings indicate that contemporary fiction literature consistently associates formal language proficiency, literary familiarity, and culturally valued communication styles with intelligence, legitimacy, and academic competence. Participants repeatedly argued that students lacking access to these linguistic and symbolic resources are often portrayed as academically deficient or socially inferior regardless of their actual intellectual potential. Another highly recurrent pattern involved marginalized student narratives, identified in 11 literary texts, where educational failure, social silence, emotional isolation, and institutional exclusion were represented as consequences of structural inequalities rather than individual shortcomings. Family-based academic advantage also appeared prominently across the narratives, illustrating how families possessing educational knowledge, literary capital, and institutional familiarity create environments that support academic achievement and cultural confidence. Several participants emphasized that literary representations of educated families frequently included scenes involving books, intellectual conversations, cultural activities, and educational planning, whereas disadvantaged families were often portrayed through economic struggle and restricted educational horizons. Teacher bias and expectation differences were another important pattern identified within the texts, reflecting implicit forms of symbolic discrimination whereby students from privileged backgrounds receive greater recognition, encouragement, and academic trust. The analysis additionally revealed that elite schools are commonly portrayed as symbolic spaces of prestige and social distinction, reinforcing the perception that educational institutions themselves operate as markers of class identity. Educational competition and anxiety emerged as recurring psychological consequences of unequal educational structures, particularly among students attempting upward social mobility. Despite the predominance of inequality-reproducing narratives, several literary texts also depicted acts of resistance, critical awareness, and refusal to conform to institutional expectations, suggesting the possibility of alternative educational subjectivities and critical cultural consciousness.

Table 3. Results of Critical Discourse Analysis of Educational Representations in Contemporary Fiction Literature

Discursive Category	Dominant Discursive Strategy	Observed Function in Texts	Analytical Interpretation
Meritocracy Discourse	Success framed as individual effort	Concealment of structural inequality	Legitimation of unequal outcomes
Deficit Representation	Lower-class students portrayed as lacking competence	Naturalization of exclusion	Internalization of inferiority
Prestige Discourse	Elite schools associated with morality and intelligence	Symbolic elevation of privileged groups	Reproduction of social distinction
Silence and Marginalization	Limited narrative voice for disadvantaged students	Exclusion from symbolic representation	Cultural invisibility
Emotional Discipline	Suppression of fear, anger, and insecurity	Encouragement of conformity	Maintenance of institutional order
Academic Labeling	Classification of students as talented or weak	Institutional categorization	Reinforcement of educational hierarchy
Resistance Discourse	Critical questioning of school authority	Emergence of oppositional consciousness	Possibility of transformative agency

The critical discourse analysis summarized in Table 3 revealed that meritocracy discourse constituted one of the most dominant ideological structures embedded within contemporary fiction narratives related to education. Literary texts frequently represented academic success as a direct result of personal effort, discipline, and talent while minimizing the influence of structural inequalities, inherited cultural resources, and socioeconomic privilege. Participants argued that such representations contribute to the normalization of unequal educational outcomes by portraying educational achievement as morally deserved rather than socially conditioned. The findings additionally demonstrated that deficit representations of lower-class students were repeatedly reproduced through descriptions emphasizing lack of competence, weak communication skills, behavioral problems, or insufficient educational motivation. This discursive pattern contributed to the symbolic naturalization of exclusion and reinforced internalized feelings of inferiority among marginalized students. Prestige discourse also emerged prominently in the analyzed texts, particularly through descriptions of elite educational institutions characterized by order, refinement, intelligence, and social legitimacy. Such representations symbolically elevated privileged social groups while simultaneously constructing educational prestige as a marker of superior cultural worth. Another important finding concerned the discursive marginalization of disadvantaged students, whose voices and perspectives were often limited, fragmented, or absent within the narrative structure itself. This symbolic silence contributed to cultural invisibility and reinforced unequal representation within literary discourse. Emotional discipline was similarly identified as a recurrent discursive mechanism through which students were encouraged to suppress frustration, fear, insecurity, and resistance in order to conform to institutional expectations. Academic labeling further reinforced educational hierarchy by categorizing students into fixed identities such as talented, weak, disciplined, or problematic, thereby shaping self-perception and social positioning within educational spaces. Nevertheless, the analysis also identified forms of resistance discourse in several literary works where characters questioned institutional authority, challenged educational injustice, or critically reflected on social inequality. These oppositional narratives suggested that contemporary fiction literature can simultaneously function as both a mechanism for reproducing dominant ideology and a space for critical social reflection and transformative awareness regarding educational inequality and cultural capital reproduction.

4. Discussion

The findings of the present study demonstrated that contemporary fiction literature plays a substantial role in representing and reproducing educational inequality through symbolic, linguistic, and cultural mechanisms associated with students' cultural capital. The thematic analysis revealed that literary narratives frequently portray educational achievement as deeply connected to inherited cultural resources, family educational background, linguistic legitimacy, and access to socially valued forms of communication. The dominance of themes such as reproduction of cultural capital, symbolic violence, hidden curriculum, and educational exclusion indicates that educational inequality within contemporary fiction is not represented merely as a material or institutional phenomenon, but rather as a multidimensional process embedded within discourse, identity formation, and symbolic interaction. These findings suggest that literary texts contribute to the normalization of educational stratification by presenting certain cultural practices, linguistic forms, and educational behaviors as naturally superior or socially legitimate. In many of the analyzed narratives, privileged students were portrayed as possessing greater communicative confidence, literary familiarity, and institutional adaptability, while marginalized students were often represented through silence, insecurity, educational anxiety, or symbolic invisibility. Such findings support the argument that literature functions not only as a mirror of social inequality but also as an active cultural mechanism involved in the reproduction of social hierarchies and symbolic distinctions.

The findings concerning the centrality of language and cultural codes in educational representation are strongly aligned with sociolinguistic and intercultural communication studies emphasizing the relationship between language, identity, and institutional legitimacy. The analyzed literary texts repeatedly associated formal linguistic competence with intelligence, educational worth, and social prestige, thereby reinforcing dominant cultural norms regarding acceptable forms of academic communication. These results are consistent with the findings of (Seidi et al., 2018), who demonstrated that educational materials and linguistic content often privilege specific cultural values and social identities while marginalizing alternative cultural expressions. Likewise, the findings correspond with the arguments of (Pennycook, 2017), who emphasized that language education and cultural politics are deeply interconnected and frequently serve broader ideological functions related to social hierarchy and symbolic power. The representation of students who lack access to dominant linguistic forms as academically weak or socially inferior also supports the observations of (Nelson, 2018), whose phenomenological study revealed that dialect variance significantly affects students' social identities and educational experiences. In the present study, literary narratives similarly portrayed linguistic difference as a marker of class distinction and educational legitimacy, demonstrating how symbolic inequality becomes embedded within everyday communication and classroom interaction.

Another important finding of the study concerned the role of family educational background and inherited cultural resources in shaping educational opportunity and identity formation. The literary corpus repeatedly represented educated and culturally privileged families as environments that facilitate academic confidence, intellectual aspiration, and institutional familiarity. These representations illustrate the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital through symbolic practices such as reading habits, literary exposure, communicative style, and educational planning. This finding is consistent with the work of (Ee, 2017), who argued that educational participation and student achievement are profoundly influenced by forms of community cultural wealth embedded within family and social environments. Similarly, the findings support the perspective of (Riaz et al., 2018), who emphasized the significance of sociopsychological orientation and social environment in shaping educational motivation and language learning engagement. The current study demonstrated that literary narratives frequently portray educational success as the product of cultivated cultural competence rather than purely individual effort, thereby exposing the hidden inequalities embedded within meritocratic discourse. Such findings challenge simplistic interpretations of academic achievement and instead emphasize the structural and symbolic dimensions of educational opportunity.

The findings additionally revealed that educational inequality in contemporary fiction literature is closely connected to experiences of symbolic violence, emotional suppression, and internalized inferiority. Many participants emphasized that literary narratives portray marginalized students as experiencing shame, anxiety, silence, and emotional isolation within educational settings characterized by unequal expectations and hidden discrimination. These findings align with the study of (Alizadeh et al., 2018), which demonstrated that educational and social environments significantly affect students' socio-emotional functioning and psychological well-being. The results are also compatible with the research of (Jean-Louis Monestès, 2018), who identified experiential avoidance and emotional suppression as common psychological processes shaped by social and cultural contexts. In the literary texts analyzed in the present study, students from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently internalized feelings of inadequacy and attempted to suppress frustration or insecurity in order to conform to institutional expectations. Such representations indicate that educational inequality extends beyond access to material resources and influences students' emotional experiences, self-perception, and identity construction. The educational environment portrayed within contemporary fiction often functions as a symbolic arena in which students negotiate legitimacy, belonging, and social worth while simultaneously confronting invisible forms of exclusion and hierarchy.

The present findings also demonstrated that schools within contemporary fiction literature are frequently represented as ideological institutions responsible for reproducing dominant cultural values and legitimizing existing social structures. Elite schools in particular were portrayed as spaces associated with prestige, refinement, discipline, and symbolic superiority. These representations reflect the operation of hidden curricula through which educational institutions transmit dominant cultural norms and reinforce class distinctions. The findings are consistent with the historical and sociocultural analysis provided by (Khanban, 2016), who argued that educational systems frequently operate as instruments for promoting ideological conformity and cultural regulation. Similarly, the findings correspond with the work of (Malinovskaya, 2017), who emphasized that schools play a central role in shaping cultural identity and defining legitimate forms of social belonging. In the present study, literary narratives repeatedly associated educational prestige with upper-class cultural practices, linguistic sophistication, and institutional authority, thereby reinforcing symbolic distinctions between socially privileged and marginalized groups. Such representations suggest that contemporary fiction literature contributes to the normalization of educational hierarchy by portraying elite educational institutions as naturally deserving of authority and legitimacy.

The findings concerning intercultural communication and identity negotiation further support previous scholarship emphasizing the relational and symbolic nature of educational interaction. Participants repeatedly described educational environments in literary narratives as spaces where students continuously negotiate identity, legitimacy, and cultural recognition through language and communication. These findings align with the perspective of (Janík, 2017), who argued that identity within intercultural contexts is dynamically constructed through communicative processes and social interaction. The results also support the arguments of (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017), who emphasized that intercultural teaching and learning involve ongoing negotiation of meaning, identity, and symbolic belonging. Literary narratives analyzed in this study frequently depicted communication itself as a form of symbolic power capable of producing inclusion or exclusion within educational settings. Students who mastered culturally valued communicative styles were portrayed as academically successful and socially legitimate, whereas students lacking such competencies were frequently marginalized or silenced. This finding additionally corresponds with the work of (Sudhiir & Sudhiir, 2016), who identified communication inequality as a significant challenge within multicultural institutions and social environments. The present study therefore suggests that educational inequality is reproduced not only through institutional structures but also through everyday communicative practices and symbolic interactions represented within literary discourse.

Another important dimension of the findings relates to the representation of globalization, multilingualism, and intercultural aspiration in educational narratives. Several literary texts portrayed students confronting

tensions between local cultural identity and global educational expectations, particularly through language learning, academic competition, and aspirations for upward social mobility. These findings are highly consistent with the arguments of (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017), who emphasized that language learning motivation in contemporary societies is deeply shaped by multicultural realities and global identity negotiation. The findings also correspond with (Davari, 2018), who highlighted the significant role of language education policy in shaping cultural identity and educational opportunity within the process of higher education internationalization. In the analyzed literary works, English language proficiency and global cultural familiarity were frequently represented as forms of symbolic capital associated with educational advancement and social prestige. Such representations reflect broader societal transformations in which globalized cultural values increasingly influence educational aspiration and symbolic distinction.

The study additionally demonstrated that literature can function simultaneously as a mechanism of ideological reproduction and a site of resistance and critical reflection. Although many literary narratives normalized educational hierarchy and symbolic inequality, some texts portrayed students and marginalized individuals challenging institutional authority, questioning meritocratic assumptions, and seeking alternative forms of cultural recognition. These findings are compatible with the multiliteracies perspective proposed by (Michelson, 2018), which conceptualizes education and cultural learning as relational and transformative processes involving critical engagement and meaning negotiation. Similarly, the findings correspond with (Anggraeni & Rachmijati, 2018), who emphasized the importance of intercultural understanding strategies in overcoming anxiety and communicative barriers within educational environments. The resistance narratives identified in the present study suggest that contemporary fiction literature possesses the potential to generate critical awareness regarding educational inequality and symbolic domination. By exposing the invisible mechanisms through which privilege and exclusion operate, literary texts may encourage readers to question dominant educational assumptions and reconsider the relationship between culture, language, and social justice.

The findings concerning cultural fit, symbolic adaptation, and institutional conformity are also consistent with organizational and sociocultural studies examining language alignment and self-regulation. The literary narratives analyzed in this study frequently portrayed students attempting to adapt themselves to dominant institutional norms through linguistic adjustment, emotional discipline, and behavioral conformity. These findings support the work of (Doyle et al., 2017), who argued that language alignment and cultural fit significantly influence processes of self-regulation and institutional integration. The results further correspond with the perspectives of (Hutcheson et al., 2018), who conceptualized educational and cultural environments as ecosystems involving symbolic value production and collective meaning-making. In the context of the present study, educational institutions represented within fiction literature functioned as symbolic ecosystems in which students' identities, aspirations, and social positions were continuously shaped through interaction with cultural norms and institutional expectations. The literary representation of educational inequality therefore reflects broader sociocultural processes involving symbolic legitimacy, cultural reproduction, and ideological normalization.

One limitation of the present study concerns the restriction of the literary corpus to selected contemporary fiction works published within a relatively specific sociocultural and temporal context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other literary traditions or historical periods. In addition, the qualitative nature of the study relied heavily on interpretive analysis and participant perspectives, meaning that alternative interpretations of literary narratives and symbolic representations may also be possible. Another limitation involved the concentration of participants within Tehran, which may not fully represent the diversity of educational and cultural experiences existing in other regions or communities. Furthermore, because literary analysis is inherently interpretive, researcher subjectivity may have influenced thematic categorization and discursive interpretation despite the use of credibility and triangulation procedures.

Future research may expand the scope of analysis by comparing representations of educational inequality across different national literary traditions, genres, or historical periods in order to identify similarities and

differences in symbolic representations of cultural capital. Comparative studies involving visual media, cinema, digital narratives, or educational television programs could also provide broader insights into the cultural reproduction of educational inequality within contemporary societies. Quantitative or mixed-method approaches may further examine the relationship between exposure to literary narratives and students' perceptions of educational legitimacy, social mobility, and class identity. Future studies may additionally investigate the perspectives of teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers regarding the role of literature in shaping educational consciousness and cultural values.

From a practical perspective, the findings of the present study highlight the importance of critically engaging students with literary representations of education, culture, and social inequality within school curricula and educational programs. Teachers and curriculum developers should encourage critical literacy practices that enable students to analyze hidden ideological assumptions embedded within literary narratives rather than passively internalizing dominant cultural representations. Educational institutions may also benefit from incorporating multicultural and socially inclusive literary texts capable of representing diverse social experiences and challenging symbolic stereotypes associated with class, language, and educational legitimacy. In addition, policymakers and educational planners should pay greater attention to the symbolic dimensions of educational inequality and recognize that educational justice involves not only material equality but also cultural recognition, communicative inclusion, and equitable representation within educational discourse and cultural production.

Moral standards

In the present study, the ethical principles related to qualitative researches were observed.

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Contribution of authors

In this research, each of the authors had a share in collecting the theoretical and research background, and the author was responsible for the initial writing of the article, analysis, writing and editing of the final article.

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