School Reforms for Low-Income Students Under Conflict Theory

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Abstract

A solid education is one of the crucial elements of achieving the American Dream. However, the privileged dominate the distribution of limited educational resources, leading to a large academic gap between people with different economic statuses. Specifically, the influence of poor experiences on disadvantaged populations, such as low-income students, has been neglected in education development. Conflict theory provides a refreshing sight to examine what obstacles low-income students have confronted and motivate school changes. The literature review explores the unequal educational experiences in low-income students, indicating challenges on their academic achievement and possibilities to success. In addition, it illustrates how to understand school reforms making efforts to eliminate gaps between the wealthy and poor students to pursue educational equity under the conflict theory.

Keywords: low-income students, educational equity, equal opportunity, academic achievement, challenges, school reforms, conflict theory

1. Introduction

Three alternative goals for American education contain democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. The complex educational objectives shed light on preparing citizens, training workers, and pursuing social positions (Labaree, 1997). What must be prioritized is that the developing dominant social mobility goal has highlighted the importance of pursuing credentialism rather than acquiring valuable knowledge. However, research shows that low-income students tend to have lower possibilities of getting a bachelor's degree than affluent students, while a college education is crucial to realizing social mobility (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). While the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasizes fostering equity in education for all students and student success (ESSA, 2015), it's essential to consider how schools treat low-income students and understand how to balance emerging conflicts in schools.

The literature review mainly focuses on school reforms for low-income students, specifically for their unequal school experiences, reflecting the contradictions between poor and wealthy students in education. In doing so, I will analyze low-income student educational opportunities in U.S schools, explore if they are treated equally on the basic level. In addition, I will examine their academic achievement and their obstacles to gaining success. In the end, I will further

illustrate how school reforms and policies contribute to their educational needs and maintain the balance between individuals struggling with social classifications.

This review has two sections of conflict theory and school reform theory, laying a theoretical foundation for supporting practical low-income students' poor educational experiences. The last five sections contain their educational opportunities, academic achievement, challenges for achieving success, specific school reforms and implications.

2. Methods

The literature review focuses on school reforms for low-income students. I use low-income students to refer to students who come from families with annual incomes of the lowest 20% nationally (around $40,000) or below 200% of the federal poverty line (StudentCaffee, 2018). Collecting the work of school reforms and policies and synthesizing the perspective of conflict theory on inequity provides a refreshing sight to conduct the literature review. Specifically, I pay attention to the low-income student educational opportunities, academic performance, and school difficulties. Mainly the factors affect their academic achievement and explore the reforms and policies to compensate their education and needs. In the end, I stress the implications of school reforms and better understand conflict theory. Those reforms for low-income students will clearly show the existing and lasting conflicts among social classes. Focusing on research of school reforms for low-income students is one of my academic interests, which urges more scholars to be aware of the educational needs of disadvantaged groups and believe they can succeed. Compared to fighting for power and gaining a big fortune in the short run, school reforms are more realistic and optimistic to help low-income students achieve personal development and life value.

I began my search for literature by using phrases such as "low-income students," "at-risk students," in combination with "educational opportunities," "academic achievements," and "challenges," "factors," "school reforms" (See KEYWORDS). The search engine that I used includes Google search, Google Scholar, the Online library of New York University, and reference articles in policy papers from the U.S. Department of Education. Besides these key criteria, the range of the research is limited in the United States. And I pay more attention to the low-income student experiences in the K-12 level of schools rather than college.

3. Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is rooted in the work of sociologist Karl Marx and developed out of the critique of functionalism. Conflict scholars blame social structures and hierarchy for harming individuals' well-being and causing a struggle between the wealthy and the poor through dominance, discrimination, and the inequitable division of resources and opportunities. It believes society is a struggling system of continuous competition for limited resources, which leads to constructing the social structure. It emphasizes that the wealthy and privileged people dominant the stratification of society through their power to suppress the powerless and hold the social order (Admas & Sydie, 2002).

Functionalism believes schools promote learning and sort and select students according to their capabilities and not determined by their social status. It is known as meritocracy. Whereas the conflict theorists suggest, the achievement ideology hides the 'real' power relations within the school, which, in turn, reflect and correspond to the power relations within the larger society (Sadovnik, 2016). In this case, Marx stresses that conflict drives social change and development (Engels & Marx, 2015).

Moreover, conflict theorists pay attention to the role of schooling in legitimizing inequality, and the current educational reforms and changes reflect the dynamics of the larger society. They stand schools preserve the status quo and reinforce social inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Besides, Education plays a significant role in disguising or justifying the exploitative nature of economic life. They believe educational reforms should be one of the revolutionary transformations of economic life.

4. School Reform Theories

Two typical school reform theories reflect the ongoing debate of school reform issues in decades. Payne (2008) compares the ideological strengths and weaknesses between liberal and conservative school reform discourses. The Table 1 shows that the conservatives believe a quantifiable approach needs an accountability system to set an incentive structure. However, the progressive pedagogy of liberals focuses

more on the process of student-centered learning, inquiry-based rather than test-based standardization of instruction.

5. Central Tendencies of Conservatives and Liberals

Table 1.

Conservatives	Liberals
Refuse to Think About Resource Reallocation	Thou Shalt Never Criticize the Poor
Only The Quantifiable Is Real	The Only Pedagogy Is Progressive Pedagogy and Thou Shalt Have No Other Pedagogy Before It.
The Path of Business Is the True Path	Leadership in a Community of Professionals Is Always Facilitative, Inclusive and Democratic
Educators Are Impractical	Test Scores Don't Mean a Thing
Change Is Simple If You Do It Right	/

The liberal thinking of the voluntary process of changing teachers' instruction and behavior is more important. For example, the first step is to accentuate the positive of a small part of teacher groups who voluntarily change their behaviors. After that, other teachers who are aware of the successful change in students' academic interests and performance would be encouraged and voluntary to modify their instructions because every teacher wants to be successful. However, the conservatives emphasize that the punishment of accountability is efficient to incentive structure in school reforms, although the punishment part always disappoints people. Linn (2003) illustrates that high-stake testing on specific subjects weakens the importance of graduation rates and other academic evaluations.

Moreover, the strict standard would strike educators instructing motivation rather than encouraging them. In this case, the effectiveness of promoting school reform through accountability has yet to be improved. In this case, school reforms need voluntary and some

pressure to incentivize people's behaviors. The key element is that reformers need to balance the urgency with complexity.

As the attitude for the poor, conservatives tend to ignore the role of the poor in creating their own problems. The idea contributes to the privileged against the poor and denies inequality issues existence. Liberals are possibly apologists for the poor because of their bad experiences with schools in the past or stressful life. However, whether the victim-blaming or apologists for any reason is detrimental to the poor integrate into the U.S society. Payne emphasizes that when people allow themselves to become merely apologists for the poor, they accept the framework of the debate, the legitimacy of the question (p. 200). However, do nothing to change the situation. The research shows that if poor parents had more resources, many of them could be better parents (p. 201). Many cases show that a stable system and effective allocation of resources, rather than parental behavior, determine whether the positive change will occur.

In this case, it is essential to focus on the strengths and possibilities that low-income parents and their children bring and encourage them to fight for their own inclusion into American society. Rather than simply acknowledge and ignore those disadvantaged groups.

6. Low-Income Students and Opportunities

The complex education goals in the U.S. contain democratic equality, social mobility, and social efficiency, respectively, under the perspective of the citizen, the taxpayer, and the consumer, which has created a contradictory structure of education (Labaree, 1997). This case leads to a different definition of equal educational opportunities. Each of them would have a distinctive effect on the possibilities for the success of low-income students.

Jencks (1988) outlines five common ways of considering equal educational opportunities, categorized as meritocratic management of resources or a compensatory distributing pattern.

7. The Way of Thinking Equal Opportunities

Table 2.

Type of Equal	Main Principles

Opportunities	
Democratic equality	Everyone deserves equal time and attention.
Moralistic justice	Reward virtue of efforts and punish vice of indolent.
Weak humane justice	Compensate students who have been shortchanged in the past school experiences.
Strong humane justice	Compensate students who have been shortchanged in the earlier school experiences and genetically.
Utilitarianism	Reward based on students' performance

It is important to consider the value of whether to reward prizes for the best learners or spend more time and energy on at-risk students. For example, weak humane justice indicates that teachers are expected to compensate students already left behind, except genetically. However, utilitarianism allows teachers to allocate educational resources to students based on their capabilities and performance. I stand that strong humane justice contributes to providing equal education opportunities to students left behind, both environmentally and genetically. Offsetting genetic disadvantages is not tricky than environmental disadvantages. For example, it is difficult for teachers to determine how "slow" two deaf children are based on the cause of their deafness. Theirs grow up context matters, and it can shape their personalities and cultivate their skills.

That is not to say that low-income students need to be treated equally merely due to their bad experiences in past schools and relatively underachievement. Even gifted low-income students tend to have fewer possibilities to be identified by their potential from teachers than other affluent peers in their early ages (Gibbons et al., 2012). It supports that the standardization test would be more effective than teachers' subjective intuition in the selecting process.

Low-income students lack adequate curriculum, materials, equipment, and qualified teachers in most states, essential for providing education. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic,

according to the statewide remote learning survey from school districts at the end of 2020, there is 14% of students in New York City lacked learning devices, and 13% of students had no access to the internet (New York Civil Liberties Union, 2021). The impact could be more severe for students who belong to minority Black or Brown school districts. As for extra educational resources, Miller & Gentry (2010) examines low-income students obtain fewer opportunities for academic enrichment than students from higher-income backgrounds. One research shows that when low-income students are provided with opportunities and financial support to participate in out-of-school enrichment programs, high-potential students are more likely to successfully perform and experience the same social and academic benefits as other students. Kornrich & Furstenber (2013) point out that families in the top two deciles of income spend 5 to 7 times as much on their children as families in the lowest two deciles, with high-quality childcare and early education being among the highest spending lists. It also shows the differential investments of family resources in educational opportunities for children between lower and higher-pay families.

8. Academic Achievement of Low-Income Students

8.1 Large Academic Achievement Gap

Reardon (2011) examines the educational gaps between low- and high-income children starting from birth. Approximately kids from higher-income families are exposed to 30 million more words by age four years than kids whose families are on welfare (Hart & Risley, 2003). Differences in vocabulary between children from higher versus lower Socioeconomic Status (SES) families are apparent at 18 months and keep developing, significantly influencing a child's intellectual development and preparation for school (Fernald et al., 2013).

Unequal distribution of educational resources and opportunities generates significant achievement gaps between low- and high-income students. Owens (2018) points out that income segregation between school districts increases achievement gaps, especially more prominent in highly segregated metropolitan areas. The fact that higher-income students perform better than low-income students also reveal a racial achievement gap due to white

students performing well in more developed, segregated areas.

8.2 Academic Potential to Success

Although there are numbers of gifted low-income students, lower family income has been shown to harm high-ability children's identification and subsequent education (Milne et al., 1986). Generally, it is more challenging to identify low-income gifted students (Slocumb, 2001). They tend to have relatively low verbal scores than high family income students. Although their nonverbal intelligence scores allow them to be enrolled in gifted programs, verbal skills still challenge them to understand and communicate with teachers (Kaya et al., 2016). As a result, low-income students have the academic potential and possibilities for success. However, there are still challenges for them to further compete in high achievement.

9. Factors of Preventing the Success of Low-Income Students

9.1 Economic Issue

Low-income families hardly provide more educational resources to their children due to their poor economic background and social status. Affluent students attend better schools and have more effective teachers. In addition, students taught by excellent teachers achieve higher grades and have better performance in the future, including a greater likelihood of college attendance and higher salaries (Chetty et al., 2014). However, research indicates that the opportunities of effective teachers to low-income students are equal or nearly equal in most of the districts (Isenberg et al., 2016). Teachers differ substantially in their effectiveness but do not substantially reduce the achievement gap of the various economic background of students in most districts.

How do economic factors become problematic for low-income students pursuing academic success in this case? Berliner (2016) points out the failure reasons for all transient school reform efforts and pays more attention to the consequence of income inequality leading to poor students failing to succeed. For example, improving poor family living wages is beneficial to improve America's schools. Specifically, it helps ensure that every low-income student can not only afford school but also increase the likelihood of accessing additional educational resources.

9.2 Parental Participation

Parental involvement plays an essential role in tackling the issue of how many children fare in school: in learning to read, in learning mathematics, in their behavior and development (Heymann & Earle, 2000). Particularly, the availability of parents to meet and communicate with teachers and specialists to solve the problem is crucial for their children who are at risk behaviorally and academically. However, the research shows that the lack of paid leave and work flexibility of nationwide low-income parents than relatively higher-income parents is a big obstacle for low-income families to help meet their children's needs. In this case, it is necessary to expand the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) coverage so that every working parent could take up to 24 hours of unpaid leave to visit schools.

9.3 Expectations

Teachers' and parents' expectations are the crucial inner incentives to students' academic achievement. Benner & Mistry (2007) examine that comparably high mother and instructor expectations positively influence low-income students' academic performance, and comparably low mother and instructor expectations have a disruptive effect. In addition, high mother expectations alleviate the negative impact on low expectations from teachers to some extent. Research suggests that mothers' beliefs, such as accompanying their kids, encouraging participating activities, teaching methods, and other parent-specific behaviors, would indirectly affect their children's beliefs (Eccles et al., 1998).

Teachers' expectations sometimes persist for many years, indicating that short-term negative expectations on students might negatively affect students both academically and mentally for the long term, especially for low-income and minority students. Sorhagen (2013) illustrates the impact from first-grade teachers' likely over and underestimates the math and language performance of students tend to have a more substantial impact on low-income backgrounds than affluent students.

10. School Reforms and Policies for Low-Income Students

Although efficiency and standardization account for the stable grammar of graded schools and Carnegie units, they are the rigid and hierarchical old grammar (Tyack & Tobin,

1994). However, the challenges for changing come from the internal school environment. For example, teachers refuse the plenty of personalized work and lack motivation due to too many failed reforms. Students also feel bored about reforms, which deteriorate their discipline. As a result, many other cases temporary attacks on the school grammar always failed.

Fortunately, due to those constant attempts at school reform, the educational needs of disadvantaged populations have been made known to the public and studied by scholars. One of the perspectives of understanding the reason for failures is to discover if schools are making efforts to benefit low-income students and shed light on their probabilities of achievement. This part will examine how school reforms could promote low-income student academic achievement.

10.1 After-School Program

After-school program (hereafter ASPs) is an effective intervention to reduce the inequalities in grades, standardizing test scores and high school graduation rates for low-income students (Guskey, 2011; Hopson & Lee, 2011). Table 3 shows some primary types of school-based after school programs. For instance, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLCs), a governmentally subsidized drive to help after-school programs in schools serving low-income kids has developed from $40 million of 1998 to $1 billion out of 2020 (Afterschool Alliance, n.d.). Bae et al. (2009) suggest that ASPs provide additional time and opportunity for disadvantaged students and ultimately strengthen public schooling, contributing to education equality. Students requiring more educational time and individualized help to acquire school requirements should positively understand it. However, Klumpner & Woolley (2021) indicate that after-school programs are excessively providing schools with a lower grouping of poor students while 21st CCLC programs are expected to serve low-income students.

11. Primary Types of School-Based After School Programs

Table 3.

Types	Features
Parental	Parent paid fee-based;
Dependent Day Care Programs	Parent supervision and enrichment activities (e.g., cultural activities, crafts).
Independent Academic Tutoring Programs	Including Supplemental Educational Services in schools that did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress;
The 21st CCLC funded Programs	Fully governmentally subsidized with academic parts
Other types of Programs	Community-based organizations proving services

11.1 Parent–School Collaborate Model

Payne (2008) points out that if poor parents have more resources, many of them could be better parents. However, in what ways could schools take responsibility for providing poor parents supports for their at-risk children? Increasing the opportunities for parental involvement in schools is a significant element. For instance, Chicago school reforms show that parents' participation and volunteering in schools can better the school environment, bring more sense of safety, and kids feel good about it (Payne, 2008).

What's more, Đurišić & Bunijeva (2017) examines the relationship of school, family, and community as a key component in school reform and student development. Increased parental involvement has been verified to promote students' success, improve parent and instructor fulfillment, and enhance school climate. The aspects of encouraging parent involvement from schools contain parenting, studying at home, communication, volunteering, decision-making, and community collaboration. If schools could provide occupations for low-income parents could also motivate their interests and increase their possibilities to participate in their children's education.

Williams et al. (2019) illustrate three ways schools should promote the academic performance of low-income students. Firstly, create a culture of hope and belief to reach success. Positive expectations are essential. Secondly, developing relationships with teachers and peers, including belonging in schools. Lastly, building meaningful cooperation with low-income parents, indicating the importance of enlarging parental involvement in schools

through parent education programs and cultivating their capacity building. For instance, knowing more information about the school staff and how the school system operates, learning policies (e.g., grade promotion/retention, graduation, parent conferences), and evaluation systems to support their children's progress. In addition, schools provide a support network for all parents, connecting their concerns and working together to affect change through their relationships. However, it is hard to say whether the poor parents would generate a sense of belonging to the parent relationship network because parents with different economic backgrounds may hardly notice poor parents' needs.

12. Implications of School Reforms Under Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists notice the conflict generates from social inequality, pay attention to power differentials, such as class conflict (Mishra, 2016). The different educational opportunities and resource distribution among low-income and high-income families reflect the continuous conflict between the elites and the masses. Students compete for a limited number of resources in an educational environment, such as the attention and time of teachers.

As for equal educational opportunities, they are aware low-income students have less access to well-educated than affluent students. This case also represents the principles of compensating to needed students rather than emphasizing rewarding talent and achievement. The unequal educational resources distribution leads to a vast academic performance gap between different economic background students. As a result, the widening academic achievement gap reinforces education inequality and raises conflicts between poor people and the privileged.

The conflict theory contributes to a better understanding of how social structure influences students in the public school system. Education as one component of society also presents a snapshot of social problems. For example, the low-income students' poor school experiences highlight unequal income disparity in society. It reflects the reality of working-class endured in society, such as low hourly wages, less working time flexibility, fewer job benefits, and housing hardships (Urban Institute, 2005). Structural functionalists believe minority students suffer academic failures due to their lack of effort and hard-working. Whereas conflict theorists blame the schools, such as instructors and principals perpetuate a system of inequality and conformity through control mechanisms. In this case, the incentive of school reforms arises from conflicts that aim to fight against the inequal and inequity in education to support oppressed classes and admit the strengths and possibilities that low-income parents and their children bring with them.

13. Conclusion

The literature review focuses on the school reforms for low-income students, conflict theory providing a refreshing perspective to consider low-income students' poor school experiences. As a result, their unequal educational opportunities and relatively low academic achievement describe a clear image of wealthy and poor students struggling for limited resources in a complex education system. The review of academic achievement part explores and notices their potential for success, motivating scholars to pay more attention to the development of those disadvantaged groups. It is a pity that low-income students always be 'defeated' due to the root of their lack of power and wealth. Exploring the factors preventing them from success cannot be an excuse for why schools fail but become motivations of reforms from schools and society to help them succeed. Reforms at a school level cannot improve their family incomes which seems a more direct way to compensate. However, the after-school program and parent-school-based cooperation can build an effective compensatory mechanism in schools. School reforms can be part of the incentives of improving the educational outcomes for low-income students. And effective reform does not happen overnight. Schools need to discover the most productive ways to improve the academic performance of low-income students as they continuously modify and experiment. In fact, the inequity issue needs interventions from the society, changing the economic structure for low-income families, improving their minimum wages, or the flexibility of work also allows them to help their academically at-risk children. In addition, community involvement in school also beneficial to the whole education environment. Due to the limited lengths in this review, how society and community support school reforms for low-income students can be a further research question.

The literature provides a comprehensive review of why and how school reforms should compensate low-income students and a deep understanding of their poor educational situations. Not only should schools stop being apologists for the poor, but they also raise educators' awareness of finding low-income student strengths and possibilities to succeed by understanding conflicts among people with different economic backgrounds.

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