**Inequality in Educational Opportunity**

Ryan Coyne

NHTI

SOCI 105C – Introduction to Sociology

John Robinson

8/23/2022

Inequality in educational opportunity is a complex and multi-layered issue. Several factors contribute to education inequality, including economic, social, and political factors. Economic factors play a significant role in educational inequality. Socioeconomically disadvantaged families are more likely to live in poverty, which can lead to several problems that make it difficult for children to succeed in school (Skopek et al., 2019). Low-income families are more likely to live in substandard housing, have less access to quality healthcare, and have less money to spend on things like books and school supplies. In addition, children from low-income families are more likely to attend underfunded schools with fewer resources. Social factors also contribute to educational inequality. Children from minority groups are more likely to attend segregated schools and have fewer resources (Harel Ben-Shahar, 2016). They are also more likely to face discrimination and bias from teachers and other students. In addition, children from families that do not speak English as a first language may have difficulty succeeding in school. Political factors also play a role in educational inequality. Distributing school funding can create disparities between rich and poor school districts. In addition, political decisions about education policy can impact the resources available to schools, and the opportunities students have to learn.

Equality of opportunity is a central aim of most nations' political agendas. Political leaders tend to speak about the need for and importance of reducing the differences in educational attainment between young persons from various social origins (Harel Ben-Shahar, 2016). Such differences are apparent in the two educational steps from the compulsory school to upper secondary and from the upper secondary school to the tertiary institutions. The steps need to be considered for their importance as they help reduce the differences in the outcome in the lack of fair opportunities in education.

The inequality in social and educational opportunity can be explored through structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionalism. Structural functionalism is a theory that views society as a complex system of interconnected parts that work together to promote stability and order (Leist et al., 2021). The conflict theory posits a fundamental conflict between different social groups and that these groups compete for scarce resources. It is a theory often used to explain social conflict and inequality. Symbolic interactionalism is a sociological perspective that focuses on the symbolic meaning people create and communicate through their interactions with others (Leist et al., 2021). It views society as a product of everyday interactions between people and emphasizes the importance of symbols and language in shaping our social world. These three theoretical models play a very important role in exploring the nature of inequalities in the education opportunities between different members of society.

There are many ways to explore the inequality in educational opportunity through structural functionalism. One way is to look at the different types of institutions within the education system. For example, there are public schools and private schools. Private schools typically have more resources than public schools, leading to a disparity in the quality of education between the two types of schools (Leist et al., 2021). Structural functionalists typically see society as being made up of parts that work together to maintain equilibrium and social order. The institutions of education are seen as very important for the skills and experiences they provide that socialize and help prepare students for their future in the wider world. (Radulović & Krstić, 2017). However, while this theoretical model makes it straightforward to see the importance of education, it can be challenging for many people to get what they see as appropriate education. The pricing of schooling and other sociological factors also come into play and determine how likely one will achieve success in education (Radulović & Krstić, 2017). This leaves the private organizations with fewer individuals, such as the people in the country who tend to have proper financial muscles to achieve what has been possible for them to get the schooling there.

Another way to explore the inequality in educational opportunity through structural functionalism is to look at the different types of students who attend different types of schools. For example, students from wealthier backgrounds are more likely to attend private schools, while students from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to attend public schools. This can create a disparity in the quality of education between different groups of students (Radulović & Krstić, 2017). The apparent disparity is seen in the fact that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to get a poor education than those from upper class and wealthy families, as public schools tend to offer lower quality education due to budget constraints (Hart, 2019). Scholarships and financial aid are used to help alleviate this disparity. In particular, merit-based scholarships are seen as fair and beneficial because students with exceptional ability will be raised up.

Current systems of education also contribute to social and economic inequality experienced after graduation. A student’s performance in school and the school that they attend influence their social and economic status later in life by determining the job they are able to get and the people they interact with. From a structural-functionalism perspective, this helps to reasonably determine a person’s position in a meritocratic society.

Structural functionalism sees a balance between public and private educational institutions that considers their purpose to society and the funding required to support them. However, it is a system where students from families that have attained high levels of education in the past tend to be more educated than students from families that have historically not been as successful in education (Harel Ben-Shahar, 2016). The theory asserts that schooling offers genuine support for the social order, which comes from the state of continuity, an essential aspect of education. Therefore, those who did not attain an advanced education are seen as unable to achieve the expected level of social continuity, which jeopardizes the social order (Harel Ben-Shahar, 2016). Therefore, just as the theory maintains that stratification and inequality are inevitable and beneficial to society, the state of educational inequality is essential for society, and it ensures that society maintains continuity.

Conflict theory rejects the functionalist idea that society’s parts work together to form a system at equilibrium. It holds that society is full of competing social groupings, each with varied goals, access to opportunities, and social incentives. According to this perspective, exploitation, oppression, dominance, and subordination are the basic foundations of social relationships between groups (Skopek et al., 2019). This perspective would explore the inequality of educational opportunity by looking at how the educational system benefits those in power while oppressing those without power. This can be seen in how the education system is used to reproduce social inequality by teaching children from different social backgrounds different things and at separate institutions (Harel Ben-Shahar, 2016). Children from wealthy families are more likely to be taught how to maintain their privileged position in society, and in contrast, children from lower-class families tend to be taught how to accept their subordinate status. This inequality is perpetuated through the education system, benefiting those in power while oppressing those without power.

Within the structural-functionalist perspective, it is often assumed that students usually have a specific middle-class experience at home, but this is not necessarily the case. In many cases, students are expected to help support the household with responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and even help shoulder the financial burden; they get the minimum time possible to do their homework and as a result perform much more poorly in their education.

Conflict theorists contend that this social reproduction persists because the dominant group's ideology permeates every aspect of the educational system. They essentially perpetuate a lie that everyone can obtain an education and use it to earn riches and social position (Skopek et al., 2019). This myth holds that each person is solely responsible for their educational failures. The deception is so effective that many parents put up with terrible employment for years in the hopes that by making this sacrifice, their children will be given opportunities in life that they did not have (Skopek et al., 2019). These underprivileged and impoverished individuals are the targets of a social confidence scam. They believed that one of education's key objectives is to promote equality when, in truth, schools serve as a reflection of society's desire to preserve the previously uneven distribution of status and power (Skopek et al., 2019).

According to conflict theory, education upholds social inequality and domination of many by a select few. Conflict theorists and functionalists examine similar educational purposes. Conflict theorists see the educational system as maintaining the status quo by lulling the lower classes into submissive laborers, in contrast to functionalists who consider the current system of education a positive contribution to an orderly society. Functionalists and conflict theorists concur that the educational system sorts students but disagree on how and why it does so. While conflict theorists contend that schools are sorted along various racial and socioeconomic lines, functionalists assert that schools are sorted based on merit. Conflict theorists contend that educational institutions prepare working-class members to accept their status as social outcasts. This function of education is known as the "hidden curriculum" by conflict theorists.

From the point of view of symbolic interactionism, there is significant inequality of educational opportunity between different social groups in society. This is due to various factors, including socioeconomic status, race, and gender. This inequality can be seen in how different groups can access and succeed in education. For example, children from low-income backgrounds are less likely to attend preschool and are more likely to drop out of school. They are also more likely to have lower test scores and grades. This inequality of educational opportunity has many negative consequences for individuals and society. It feeds into social stratification and the reproduction of inequality by limiting the opportunities of some but not others (Checchi et al., 2018).

Symbolic interactionists primarily consider what they see happening in the classroom when they analyze schooling. How student performance, perceptions, and attitudes are affected by instructor expectations, as well as the social interactions in classrooms, playgrounds, and other settings associated with schools, are the main focus of the symbolic interactionist viewpoint (Checchi et al., 2018).

Labeling theory is one major part of symbolic interactionism, which focuses on the stigmatization attached to people of particular groups by the agents of social control. This labeling is said to cause a feedback loop, which in the case of labeling theory is often known as a self-fulfilling prophecy, where those who are given labels fall into behaviors that correspond to the label, which then reinforce the label (Becker, 1963).

Consciously or subconsciously, authority figures in schools often label students in various ways. For example, a student who gets into a fight might be labeled as a troublemaker, whether they were a victim or a perpetrator. In another example, a student who does poorly on a standardized test might be labeled as an underachiever even if they could improve in the future. These labels can be based on things that a student has done or preexisting prejudices that the authority figure has, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be labeled in this way. These labels can cause and reinforce a lack of motivation for academic success and other behaviors that will hold students back academically via the self-fulfilling prophecy (Rist, 1970).

Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have a lower motivation to succeed in school. This is a result of cultural attitudes and the ability of parents to induce motivation in their children through things such as encouragement and private tutoring (Harel Ben-Shahar, 2016). Social contacts are important in motivating one another into education or lack of education; in other words, if a student’s friends are motivated toward academic achievement, then it is likely the student will also be influenced to achieve and vice versa. Students in such peer groups may even deliberately underachieve to avoid social ostracization. Further, if educators themselves are not invested in a student’s success, the student will be disinclined to be invested themselves. All of these factors combine to create an environment that discourages a student from putting in the effort needed to succeed and are more likely to be present in low-income areas (Becker, 2002).

The symbolic interactionist perspective sees that even when disadvantaged students are able to attend schools with higher prestige and funding, the majority of the students they are attending with come from a very different socioeconomic background. This can make it difficult for these students to relate to their peers and make friends. These students then begin to feel alienated or as though they do not have the support and encouragement for success that they should or even that their peers do.

Educational inequality is a complex issue with a multitude of causes, and the way these three theories view inequality in education can vary drastically. Structural functionalism holds that inequalities in education are a valuable function of the system and help to maintain a meritocratic society. The framework sees these inequalities as evidence of or necessary for a functioning society where success is determined by ability. Conflict theory argues that the educational system is designed in a way that it helps those who happen to be in power and maintains the oppression of those that have no power. This is evident in the class and race based stratification of educational outcomes centered. In essence, a student’s socioeconomic class can provide them with huge advantages or crippling hurdles to achieving success in education. The perspective of symbolic interactionism considers factors that lead to educational inequalities on a much smaller scope. The interactions between people, especially the students, determine how likely they are to be given the opportunities and encouragement to learn, which results in a disparity in educational attainment between groups.

**References**

Skopek, J., Triventi, M., & Buchholz, S. (2019). How do educational systems affect social inequality of educational opportunities? The role of tracking in comparative perspective. *Research handbook on the sociology of education*.

Harel Ben-Shahar, T. (2016). Equality in Education–Why we must go all the way. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *19*(1), 83-100.

Leist, A. K., Bar-Haim, E., & Chauvel, L. (2021). Inequality of educational opportunity at time of schooling predicts cognitive functioning in later adulthood. *SSM-population health*, *15*, 100837.

Hart, C. S. (2019). Education, inequality and social justice: A critical analysis applying the Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework. *Policy Futures in Education*, *17*(5), 582-598.

Checchi, D., & van De Werfhorst, H. G. (2018). Policies, skills and earnings: how educational inequality affects earnings inequality. *Socio-Economic Review*, *16*(1), 137-160.

Radulović, L. M., & Krstić, S. M. (2017). Social inequality in education analyzed within various theoretical frameworks. *Facta Universitatis. Series: Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology and History*, 025-036.

Becker, B. E., & Luthar, S. S. (2002). Social-Emotional Factors Affecting Achievement Outcomes Among Disadvantaged Students: Closing the Achievement Gap. Educational psychologist, 37(4), 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3704_1>

Rist, R. (1970) Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education. Harvard Educational Review, 40, 411-451.