

Conflict theory and k-12 education in hong kong



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Education is the process of facilitating the transfer of knowledge, skills, and values. It is widely accepted as a fundamental human right across the world because of the important role it plays in the well-being of a nation. Education not only equips individuals with skills and knowledge that can be monetized in the future, but also imparts social values, traditions, and code of conduct that are crucial to living in society. Countries with a highly educated population tend to be economically stable and peaceful. The importance of education is evident, however, the specific role of education in society remains a topic that raises plenty of debate. Several theories have been proposed to explain the role of education, such as functionalist and conflict theories. Functionalists believe that education serves to address the needs of society. Conflict theorists, on the contrary, see education as a means of maintaining social inequality while conserving power with those who dominate society. This paper will focus on the conflict theory of education to determine its relevance to the Hong Kong education system. The education program in Hong Kong, 3-3-4 scheme, is one of the most celebrated in the world. Nevertheless, the curriculum relies heavily on examination scores to evaluate a learner's ability raising concerns over its ultimate impact on the student. Learners are not interested in the content of their teachings and would rather focus on how to achieve high scores. Good scores ensure entrance into a good course in the limited number of institutions of higher learning. The pressure to pass is high leading to students seeking costly tutoring services to gain an advantage. A tuition culture has become rampant in the city with parents paying high tuition fees to ensure that their

children are better prepared for the examination raising concerns over inequality in the education system. Learners from poor backgrounds lack access to these tutoring services leaving them at a disadvantage. The current K-12 education in Hong Kong is clearly elitist and favors learners from upper and middle classes.

Literature Review

Conflict Theory in Education

Conflict theory was a concept that was first introduced by Karl Marx and looks at society as a competition for limited resources. Karl Marx saw society as a stratified entity made up of people from different social classes who have to compete for a limited number of resources. People in different classes compete for needs such as food, shelter, employment, and education amongst other socio-political and material resources (Pruitt, 2018). Karl Marx was interested in understanding the cause and consequence of the class tension that existed between the owners of capital and the working class. The conflict theory was proposed as he was observing the impact of the rise of capitalism across Europe at the turn of the 19th century. The theory is based on the prerequisite that a small and powerful minority class known as the bourgeoisie is oppressing the majority class of proletariats (Pruitt, 2018). Social institutions are skewed in favor of the bourgeoisie with the government, education, and religion intrinsically unequal.

According to the conflict theory, social institutions are also created to help maintain the status quo. The unequal social order is maintained through ideological manipulation to create consensus, an acceptance of the values as <https://assignbuster.com/conflict-theory-and-k-12-education-in-hong-kong/>

dictated by the bourgeoisie (Dolby & Dimitriadis, 2013). Social institutions, culture, and political institutions are used to pass values that guarantee preservation of the privilege of the bourgeoisie at the expense of the poor. Marx theorized that if circumstances continue to worsen for the underprivileged a conscious awareness of their exploitation by the bourgeoisie would arise leading to an uprising against the system with the working class calling for changes. Even if the changes were to be implemented but capitalism maintained, the pattern of conflict would repeat.

Chernoff (2016) states that the aim of education was to maintain social inequality and keeping power among those who rule. The education system perpetuates the status quo by conditioning those from a lower class into obedient employees. Functionalists and conflict theorists both agree that education employs a sorting strategy but where functionalists believe that the sorting is based on merit while conflict theorists believe it is based on social class. This sorting system creates a situation where students from lower social status are trained to accept their diminished role in society. The students from the upper class are at an advantage since they have access to better teaching environments, better trained teachers, and better equipped schools. The advantage translates into higher education setting up students from privileged backgrounds for lucrative careers.

Education in Hong Kong

Wong (2017) recognizes that the Hong Kong education system closely resembles the one in the UK given it was under British rule until 1997 before the special zone was handed back to the Chinese government. Education

was free and compulsory for primary and junior secondary education from 1970. Originally, the education system incorporated a “3-2-2-3” secondary and higher education structure after the compulsory six-year primary school period. In the old system, students in Hong Kong were expected to complete three years of junior secondary school, followed by a further two years in senior secondary school (Raygan, 2016). To proceed to the next level, students had to sit and pass the Hong Kong Education Examination (HKEE). Passing the HKEE allowed students to go to the last two years of advanced secondary education before sitting for a final paper, Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), which determines progress to the university which lasted for three years.

Spires (2017) acknowledges the reforms of 2000 in the Hong Kong education system that gave rise to the 3-3-4 curriculum for secondary and higher education. After analyzing the education system for ten years prior, the curriculum development council identified gaps in the old system and suggested for a change in the structure of secondary education. The old system was bulky with the two exams placing unnecessary pressure on students at an early point in their lives. The system also had a high filtration rate with students who failed in the first exam prematurely entering the job market or pursuing other opportunities outside of education. Rather than spending seven years in secondary school, the new system advocates for a total of six years with three spent in junior secondary and another three years of senior secondary education. The number of examinations were also reduced with HKCEE and HKALE scrapped off in favor of a single exam: the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE). The aim of this move

is to shift teaching practice from memorization and exam preparations to teaching that is focused self-discovery, talent exploration, and experiential learning.

Examinations and Tutoring

Although the intention of the 3-3-4 reforms in the education system was meant to improve the learning experience of students it has created more pressure on them to perform well in the single all-important examination (Wong, 2017). In the K-12 setting, the 3-3-4 system allows has made the HKDSE the single most important determinant for success in secondary school. The results of this examination determine the future course in university one can enter playing a crucial role in shaping the academic life of students. The stress generated by this examination has led to the tutoring arms race in secondary schools with emphasis placed on how best to pass the examinations rather than imparting the necessary skills to the learner. The education system in Hong Kong has been characterized as a rigid, competitive, and hierarchical pathway that leads a single high-stake final examination that has significant impact on the future of the student. Examinations, therefore, hold great importance in Hong Kong's education system.

According to Feinburg at al. (2015) private tutoring is a common ways of supplementing one's education to increase the chances of success in schools. A survey conducted in England revealed that there was an increase in the number of parents who paid for private tutoring services between 2013 and 2015. The survey indicated that parents who were already paying

a premium by sending their children to private school were more likely to fork out more for tutoring compared with parents whose students attend state schools. Tutoring, therefore, is a privy of the upper- and middle-class students. Feinburg further demonstrated that one-on-one tutoring was more popular in private schools than in state-run facilities. A comparative analysis of two different schools was done whereby data was collected from a private school and public school on the number of children had private tutoring. The results showed that almost 21% of children in private school had a tutor compared to 17% of students in state sponsored schools (Feinberg & Soltis, 2015). The study identified a gap in the tutoring market created because of inequality. Students from well-off families were more likely to engage a personal tutor compared with those from poor backgrounds.

Inequality in the K-12 Education in Hong Kong

The exam-based education system in Hong Kong has created a tutoring arms race that favors children from upper- and middle-class homes. The education system in Hong Kong is heavily centered on assessments and examinations with students from as low as the kindergarten level expected to attend rigorous interview workshops. The results of these assessments determine the trajectory of the life and academic future of the student. In the K-12 education space, the two qualifying examinations of the old 3-2-2-3 higher education system were scrapped and replaced with only one HKDSE paper in the new 3-3-4 structure. Students must sit for this public test which is crucial in determining the academic progression and course qualification in institutions of higher learning. Hong Kong's education system is likened to a rigid hierarchical pathway that culminates in an all-important examination

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that will determine placement into a limited number of local universities (Wong, 2017). The pressure to succeed in these examinations has increased consumer uptake of tutoring services. The high demand for the services has in turn led to a rise in the price of good tutors. Private tutoring in Hong Kong has rapidly grown into a multimillion-dollar industry with celebrity tutors raking in millions annually. The average cost of a private class ranges from HK\$150 to HK\$200 with each class running for an hour to 75 minutes (Zheng, 2018). Therefore, the families that can afford private tutoring are in the middle and upper classes of society. These costly tutoring services quickly become inaccessible for students from low income households. Students from middle-class and upper-class homes are at an advantage because they have better access to tutors increasing their chances of attaining a good score. Inequality in accessing tutoring services demonstrates elitism in the K-12 education system since students from affluent and middle-class homes have an advantage over students from working class families. K-12 education in Hong Kong is elitist, favoring those students with means.

Students from low income households have less time to study compared with their counterparts. Low income households cannot afford to hire professional help so some students often have to contend with helping out at home while others are expected to contribute financially at home for their younger siblings. Wong (2017) also noted that a significant proportion of students from poor backgrounds at the K-12 level had to engage in some form of labor activity on the side as a means of raising funds. This is a challenge students from middle class and upper class homes do not face creating a disparity

between the time each group of student can spend reading, revising, and preparing for an examination. In a scenario where the teacher gives an assignment to two students in the same class from different backgrounds that takes a week to complete, the student from the affluent background is more likely to dedicate more time to the project compared to his or her counterpart from a poorer background because of the extra responsibilities he may have. The exam-oriented nature of the K-12 education system requires that the student dedicate enough time and effort into revising for the DSE. In the scenario elaborated above, students from affluent backgrounds are more likely to have more revision time compared to those from poorer neighborhoods with a myriad of responsibilities. The K-12 education system in Hong Kong does not factor these attributes in its final examination with all students subjected to the same standard test. Hong Kong's secondary education could be considered beneficial to students from affluent homes and unfair to students from low income households.

Students from low income areas may have a poorer studying environment making it harder to study and do assignments compared with others. The low-income areas of the city of Hong Kong are often overpopulated and noisy compared with high income neighborhoods. Schools and students in such poor areas of the city do not have the same amenities and environment that promotes studying as seen in the private schools on the wealthier areas of Hong Kong. Even when at home, students from upper- and middle-class homes tend to have more opportunities to study. The environment, therefore, favors students from middle class and upper-class homes since their schools and homes are located in areas with little pollution, low

population, and more quieter streets. The Hong Kong authorities in charge of education, however, fail to factor in these conditions when subjecting the students to examinations. The system, therefore, can be deemed elitists since students from poor backgrounds are at a disadvantage.

Lack of family support in their educational pursuits is also more common in working class homes. Students from middle and upper social classes often go to the very best schools where competent and committed teachers put in the work to help students learn well and achieve success in their examination. Students from these social strata tend to have a good support system in parents, family members, and guardians. On the other hand, students from working homes cannot go to top schools and statistics show that family support in this cohort is slightly reduced compared with middle class and upper-class homes. This reduction can be attributed to the family's attention being split between the varying needs of day to day living. All these factors lead to poor performance for children in poor homes as a result. The education system, therefore, is elitist with students from middle- and upper-class society afforded better learning conditions and support.

Poor families struggle to meet the financial needs of their children unlike middle class and affluent families. An education gap exists between learners from affluent backgrounds and those from poor ones (Siraj & Mayo, 2016). Students from low-income households are less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities due to financial restrains. Activities such as swimming, playing musical instruments, and dancing help children grow, develop skills, and socialize (Siraj & Mayo, 2016). Poorer students may not gain these crucial skills and connections when they fail to take part. Low income

students are less likely to go on educational trips and holidays as well. Some working-class families cannot afford essential educational materials such as books and stationery. The lack of these basic things leaves such students at a disadvantage further elaborating the elitism that exist in Hong Kong's education system.

Students from low-income backgrounds have lower cultural capital compared to those from middle- and upper-income homes. Cultural capital is knowledge that helps one navigate a certain culture creating more opportunity for the individual within society. Members of the upper-class and those from the middle-class have more cultural capital than members of the working class (Wiseman, 2018). The instructions and tests in Hong Kong's education tend to cater to the dominant cultural values of these upper social classes (Wong, 2017b). Students from low income backgrounds may struggle with identifying with the values and competencies that may be foreign to their social circle. The rewards for cultural capital extend beyond the classroom. Nonacademic knowledge transferred through cultural transmission and informal learning favor the upper classes. Students from poorer backgrounds tend to have less comprehension of these cultural traits that would lead to their success demonstrating the elitism that exist in the K-12 school system.

Finally, the sorting of students according to social class favors the middle- and upper-class students more than those from working families. Sorting occurs in the Hong Kong education system based on social class. Top performing schools and International schools are often located in affluent neighborhoods and attract people from the upper class. The top learning

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facilities in the city are private and expensive leading to a situation where only students from high-income families can afford to attend. Students from low income households often end up studying in state sponsored schools around the city that might not have similar facilities, staff, and stellar reputations as the private and expensive big schools. This stratification and grouping of students from similar backgrounds leads to a situation where wealthier students receive better education, create more beneficial social networks, and have better chances of succeeding compared to students living in the poorer sides of the city. The setup of Hong Kong's secondary education system is, therefore, elitist since students from elite backgrounds have access to better schools and have the chance of forming more valuable connections and networks.

Conclusion

Education is a crucial aspect of society that helps shape the future of generations and improve the performance of a nation. However, according to the conflict theory proposed by Karl Max, education is a social construct designed to ensure that society remains stratified with power and influence preserved amongst the top brass while those from lower social status are programmed to accept the values and rules of the owners of capital. Hong Kong's education system is modeled after the British one with six years of compulsory and free primary education before a 3-3-4 structure is applied in secondary school and college education. The 3-3-4 structure has brought about changes in the examination pattern at K-12 level with the two previous qualifying exams being eliminated and replaced with a single HKDSE paper. An analysis of the education system revealed several cases of inequality that

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supports the thesis of the paper. One such inequality is seen in the utilization of private tutors to pass the all-important HKDSE, with only students from middle class and upper-class homes affording a tutor giving them an advantage over those from working homes. Other factors that make Hong Kong's education elitist include poor children having less time to study, poor studying environment, and a lack of crucial resources in low-income schools. The system favors students from high income families since examinations are set according to the cultural capital of this social group, they have access to better equipment, staff, and can form more valuable social circles compared to their counterparts. The study concludes that Hong Kong's K-12 education system remains elitist.

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