Parental Variables, Racial Inequality, and Healthy Children: How Income Inequality Creates Gaps in the Education System

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Lower income neighbourhoods are not afforded the same luxuries as their higher income counterparts. The neighbourhood that parents choose to live in directly affects the school that their child(s) can attend. Most provinces in B.C have regulations that dictate children may only enroll in the public schools within their catchment area. An example of an exception is Alberta, where parents may send their child(s) to any school within the city, provided there is space available. Thus, if a family is situated in a low income neighbourhood, then they can only send their child(s) to a school in that area. The schools in such a neighbourhood are typically underfunded and neglected, which leaves students potentially unable to reach their full potential. According to Statistics Canada, nearly 1.2 million children under the age of 18 lived in a low income household in Canada in 2015. Income inequality is creating gaps in the education system and causing children to fall through the proverbial cracks. Despite Canada’s attempt to promote equal opportunity and access to education, the experience and outcomes of students differ greatly depending on their family’s socioeconomic status. What separates these families is much more than just income. There are many factors that put families in low income households and in turn those factors affect how children from low income families receive an education. This essay will examine three variables of income inequality that are contributing factors in creating gaps in the education system. First, are the parental contributions that play a role in income inequality. Within this theme, the topics that will be discussed are attainment of education, and marital status. Second, will be racialized inequality. This theme will discuss children of immigrant, visible minority, and Aboriginal parents. The third theme is ‘healthy children” and how having a healthy childhood is affected by income inequality, which thus affects a child’s education. Moreover, this essay will discuss how income inequality has affected students’ learning outcomes throughout Canada. Lastly, the conflict perspective will be applied to the issue of income inequality and how it affects education.

**Parental Variables**

A substantial factor that needs to be considered when exploring the gap in education is the contributions of a child’s parents. Two key variables to explore within this theme are the education that parents attained, their marital status.

**Education**

A parent’s education may be a predictor of their child’s academic performance as a student (Friesen & Krauth 2008) and part of that is because of the employment they would receive in correlation with their education. According to Statistics Canada (2017), women with a bachelor’s degree earn 40% more than women with a college diploma, 60% more than women than a high school diploma and 80% more than women with an apprenticeship certificate. On the other hand, men that obtained an apprenticeship certificate had faster growth in earnings than men with other education (Statistics Canada 2017). The conclusion drawn from these statistics is that the type of education an individual receives will greatly influence their careers, employment, and earnings in the future. Parents that work jobs with better earnings are able to provide more fully for their child. Burton and Phipps (2009) deduce that a [parent or guardian] with education less than a high school diploma are more likely to be low income. In relation, a higher income means a greater capability to finance and support their child. In terms of consumption, child related expenditure can positively influence a child’s outcomes in a school setting (Dooley & Stewart 2004). These expenditures could include extra-curricular activities such as after school programs, art classes, sports, or summer camps. They could also include paying for a tutor, or financing school supplies such as instruments, lab equipment, books, art supplies, or field trips. According to Friesen and Krauth (2007), a child’s learning may be directly affected if parents with sufficient means are able to supply more resources in support of their child’s education.

However, there are some negatives that have been found to stem from parents with higher income. First is that although a higher family income increases material possessions, it also means that parents may work greater number of hours per week, thus decreasing parental time with the child ( Burton & Phipps 2008). Second, is that if a parent chooses to return to school to augment their education this may reduce the income due to a cut back on paid work time. So in an effort to improve family income in the long run, a parent must decrease income short term.

**Marital Status**

The marital status of a parent can also substantially affect a family income. As a two parent household, each parent would contribute their incomes to the family. However, if parents choose to divorce, this can cause the standard of living for both the parents, and the children to fall, thus increasing the inequality of income between the children and their peers. In a census done by Statistics Canada (2016), the percentage of two parent families with children aged 0-17 living in prevalence of low income was 9.0%. Compare this to a lone male parent with children aged 0-17 with a prevalence of low income at 27.0%, and a lone female parent with children aged 0-17 with a prevalence of low income at 41.0%. Furthermore, while 50%-60% of single mother families reported annual income from welfare, only 5%-8% of two parent families reported receiving annual income from welfare (Dooley & Stewart 2004). It is assumed that everyone in the family would benefit equally from a parent’s income. However, in a low income family, of both or lone parents, some parents may sacrifice their needs in order to support their child’s learning.

**Racialized Inequality**

Jones (2000) deems visible minorities the invisible members of our society. This can be attributed to racialized inequality. Racialized inequality includes the equality of opportunities, such as differential access to power, privilege, and poverty, and the equality of outcomes such as the differential distribution of valued resources among members of society. As social exclusion, racialized inequality includes unequal conditions that preclude opportunity and access to belonging in society, services and resources, and rights and capabilities. As discussed in class, Canada remains a racially stratified society. In terms of income differences, racialized women do more poorly than other women and more poorly than racialized men. The wage gap between Caucasians and racialized minorities is nearly $10,000.00. Burton and Phipps (2009) determined that there was likelihood for immigrant parents to “stick” and spend at least a year living in low income.

The value of attaining education for parents was earlier discussed. This becomes much more challenging for an immigrant parent. For an immigrant parent, credentials do not transfer well and 60% of immigrants who possess a degree end up not working in their specialized areas after moving to Canada. Besides credentials, a main factor in losing work is that immigrants face prejudicial discrimination over language competency.

This now begs the question, how does this translate to children of immigrant parents? Well, because immigrant parents are underpaid and undervalued, they are deemed more likely to be low income. This then leads them to reside in low income neighbourhoods and send their children to low income schools. There is a high chance that there will be a second language spoken in the home, other than English, and there will then be a language barrier between the child and their peers, and the child and the teacher. The problem then becomes that because the student is at a low income school, there may not be sufficient support for students with language impairment and those students will then struggle. Jones (2000) argues that the education system should provide the resources necessary for the development of children of immigrant families. Jones continues on to state that these children deserve equality and should be offered extra instruction to help them learn at the same pace as the rest of the class (2000).

In regards to First Nations communities, there are generations of parents and grandparents who suffered at the hands of schooling and education through the establishment of residential schools. After the epidemic of the residential schools, many individuals did not continue with their education. In terms of their children, many of these parents and grandparents may be skeptical of the public education system now and not want to send their children to public school. Reservations unfortunately do fall into the low income category, and the schools on many reservations reflect that.

**Healthy Children**

Since the public school system was introduced, there have been many discussions as to what constitutes a ‘healthy child’. In today’s society, many people would say that a happy child is a healthy child. In a study done by Burton and Phipps (2008), it was determined that youth, age 12-15, were happier when their family income was higher. More specifically, their parents’ long-run average income mattered more to them than the current income their parents would make that year. However, the study also concluded that youth are less happy when the neighbourhood income was high (Burton & Phipps 2008). This could perhaps be because youth are more exposed to media and have higher consumption aspirations, thus feeling the need to keep up with their peers. Furthermore, adults can make a choice as to where they live, but children and youth do not get that choice and may be unhappy with their neighbourhood. Other conclusions that can be drawn from this study are that children, for example 6-10 year olds, may be happier in low income families than teens. This is because children may be less aware of family income and a low income parent may shelter their children so that they remain unaware of the situation.

Continuing that thinking, coming from a low income family may take away the childhood from a child. For example, while children from higher income families are able to have many opportunities and resources available to them, children living in low income households may not have access to those same opportunities and resources. This could take a toll on the child’s self-esteem, which could in turn affect their behavior at school. Another example would be that parents in a low income household would be working more strenuous jobs with longer hours, and fewer benefits, in order to provide for the family. This could potentially mean that a child would have to assume more responsibilities at home such as cooking, cleaning, or taking care of other siblings. A child may also have to take on a provider role and begin working in order to help buy groceries for the family, or to pay for their own wants and needs. Taking on these responsibilities would also take away time from school work and cause a child to grow up quickly out of necessity to the family.

A ‘healthy child’ can also be defined in literal terms. Healthy meals can have a huge influence on how a child is able to interact and function throughout the day. A child in a low income family may not always get the proper nutrition they need. This can cause a child to lose focus during the school day, initiate behavioural problems, or become ill. Many schools do have a breakfast or lunch program, but being seen attending those programs may also affect a child’s self-esteem. Another example is joining a sports team. If the registration fee is too high, or the equipment is unaffordable it can cause emotional stress or unhealthy habits because the family cannot afford to play organized sports.

**Effects of Low Income on Test Scores**

Thus far, variables that affect education inequality have been discussed and the root of those variables lie in family income. Many studies have been done to find a correlation between low income households and those children’s ability to learn. First, desirable schools make real estate prices of the surrounding area substantially higher. As prices sky rocket, these neighbourhoods become high income areas, with high income schools, leaving the remaining schools to take in students who can no longer afford the other schools. This increase in enrollment can stretch the capacity of classrooms and the capability of teachers (Rao & Jani 2008). This can result in a loss of resources in terms of the curriculum and the teacher. A study done by Friesen and Krauth (2007) split their research into two categories: ethno-cultural and characteristics that related to socio-economic status. This study found that there was a positive relationship with test scores when students were sorted into groups by ethno-cultural variables, but a negative relationship between test scores and students who were sorted into groups based on the wage/salary income of their families. A research report from the Toronto District School Board (2010) found that language impairments, developmental disabilities, and behavioural problems were more likely to be seen in lower income areas of Toronto. Furthermore, from the number of noted gifted students throughout the district, only 3% of those gifted students were from low income areas.

**Applying the Conflict Perspective**

In order to properly apply the conflict theory to the issue of income inequality and how it causes gaps in the education system, the three themes of this essay must be analyzed under the conflict theory. First is the parental contribution to a child’s education. Opening this theme is a parent’s attainment of education and how it affects their future employment and income. If a female parent obtained a bachelor’s degree, she is more likely to earn 60% more than a female parent who only has her high school diploma. The parent with the bachelor’s degree then has greater access to the means of production and is now in conflict with the parent who only has her high school diploma. The lower income parent may work a manual labour job, such as a maid or a nanny, for the higher income parent and is selling her labour power in order to survive on a daily basis. The situation in squarely on the relationship between the higher income parent who is taking labour from the exploited, lower income parent.

The second topic of this theme is the marital status of a parent and how it affects their income. An example of marital status affecting income would be if a husband and wife chose to divorce. The husband with children ages 0-17 would have a prevalence of low income of 27.0%, while the wife with children ages 0-17 would have a prevalence of low income of 41.0%. This could be because women face inequality in the workforce and would earn less income on her own than a man would. According to the conflict theory, class, age, gender, ethnicity, and race are the sets of social relations that are characterized by power. Say that the husband was a young, white male, and the wife was an older, female of a visible minority, the husband would have higher access to the means of production based upon those sets of social relations.

The second theme is racialized inequality. This section of the essay discussed how it was harder for immigrant parents to get a job because their credentials didn’t transfer to Canada, and because there was a language barrier. Immigrants and visible minorities also experience inequality in wages. This fits the conflict perspective because it reflects, reinforces, and advances the interests and experiences of the upper class by keeping the high paying jobs away from the immigrants. This creates a powerful ideology that the superior group is the dominating white, upper class. This is also seen with First Nations communities.

Lastly is the idea of a ‘healthy child’ and how that affects experiences in education. The conflict perspective can be applied to this theme because it was stated that youth were unhappy when their neighbourhood income was high, because it meant they had to keep up with everyone else’s consumption aspirations, but perhaps didn’t have the means for it. This could put them in conflict with peers in the neighbourhood that didn’t have a problem with the consumption aspirations and had immediate access to the products. Furthermore, if a low income school has a sports team and competes against a high income school, the high income school is more likely to have better equipment, playing facilities, and coaches. This demonstrates how society is divided by the access to the means of production.

What separates these families is more than just income. This essay analyzed parental variables in terms of how they affect a family’s income, how racial inequality affects employment for parents and education for children, and the idea of a ‘healthy child’ and how low income affects that idea. Research on the correlation between low income areas and lower test scores was examined, and lastly, the conflict theory was applied to this issue as a whole. In conclusion, there are many factors that put families in low income households and in turn those factors affect how children from low income families receive an education.

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