

Power Dynamics and Class Struggle in the Academic System: A Conflict Theory Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines power dynamics and class struggle in the academic system through the lens of Conflict Theory. Grounded in the works of Karl Marx, Ralf Dahrendorf, and Randall Collins, it explores how educational institutions both reproduce inequality and serve as spaces for transformation. Drawing from recent Philippine and international studies, the paper highlights enduring disparities in educational access, authority distribution, and student outcomes, emphasizing that schools mirror broader social hierarchies. It further investigates how authority, resistance, and symbolic power shape the reproduction of privilege and the potential for reform within academic systems. Contemporary extensions of conflict theory introduce intersectionality, showing how class, gender, and identity intersect to influence educational power relations. Feminist conflict theory critiques the persistence of patriarchal hierarchies that limit women's agency in leadership.

Keywords: Conflict theory, social inequality, power relations, authority, education system, class struggle, social change, domination, resistance

INTRODUCTION TO CONFLICT THEORY

This article is anchored on Conflict Theory, a sociological framework that examines how social order arises not from harmony but from tension and struggle between groups competing for power, resources, and control. Rooted in the classical works of Karl Marx, and later expanded by Ralf Dahrendorf and Randall Collins, the theory asserts that inequality and conflict are natural and inevitable features of society and that meaningful social change emerges from these conflicts.

Karl Marx viewed society as divided into two major classes: the bourgeoisie, those who control the means of production and the proletariat, the working class. This division creates a continuous class struggle because the interests of these two groups are fundamentally opposed. Marx believed that social institutions including education serve as instruments of the dominant class to maintain power and reproduce inequality. In the Philippine context, Karol Yee (2024) revealed that despite significant educational expansion, structural inequalities persist in access, completion, and labor outcomes. Using Marx's framework, Yee argued that schools or institutions continue to favor the elite by converting economic capital into educational advantage. This validates Marx's claim that the education system reproduces social hierarchy rather than dismantling it.

In the academic system, this perspective manifests through the unequal access to quality education, hierarchical relations between administrators, teachers, and students, and the reproduction of privilege among the elite. Schools, according to Marxist thought, function as mechanisms that legitimize inequality by rewarding compliance, competition, and performance metrics that favor those already advantaged by social class. Thus, education becomes a reflection of the larger capitalist system that perpetuates stratification.

Ralf Dahrendorf expanded Marx's ideas by focusing not only on economic class but on authority as the source of social conflict. He reiterates that every organization including schools is composed of dominant and

subordinate positions, where authority is unequally distributed. Those in authority (administrators, policymakers) set the rules, while subordinates (teachers, students) are expected to comply. Brooks and Brooks (2018) examined ethno-religious power relations among school leaders in Mindanao and found that leadership practices often privilege dominant cultural identities while marginalizing minority voices.

The Dahrendorf's Theory

Drawing on Dahrendorf's theory, the study explained how authority structures within schools serve as mechanisms of domination. However, when principals or administrators adopted culturally responsive practices, latent conflict was transformed into constructive change, demonstrating that conflict, when properly managed, can drive institutional reform. This unequal distribution of authority creates latent conflict that can become manifest when subordinate groups challenge existing structures. For example, student protests, teacher unions, or academic freedom movements are expressions of conflict that emerge when authority is perceived as oppressive or unjust. Dahrendorf believed that this conflict is not necessarily negative rather, it is a driving force for institutional reform and social progress.

Ralf Dahrendorf's conflict theory has profoundly shaped the modern understanding of authority, class, and social change. Dahrendorf argued that unlike Marx, who centered class conflict on economic ownership, real social divisions in industrial and post-industrial societies stem from authority relations within organizations and institutions. In his major work, "class and class conflict in industrial society", Dahrendorf emphasized that most modern conflicts arise not from property ownership but from who controls decision-making and exercises authority, such as managers versus workers or administrators versus teachers, making his theory directly relevant to analyzing educational systems (Tittenbrun, 2016).

One central concept in Dahrendorf's theory is that of imperatively coordinated associations: social groups and institutions with hierarchically structured authority roles. He contended that it is not individual personalities but social positions (e.g., principal vs. student, administrator vs. faculty) that determine who holds authority and faces subordination. Latent interests arise unconsciously from these structured roles and become manifest interests when groups recognize their common position and organize for collective action (SociologyGuide, 2025; Dahrendorf, 1959). This insight explains why conflicts emerge within schools and universities, not merely from overt economic exploitation but also from struggles over legitimacy, participation, and decision-making power.

Dahrendorf also advanced the understanding of how class and authority dynamics drive social change and institutional reform. He argued that conflict is not only inevitable but also beneficial, serving as the engine of progress by challenging the status quo and making systems more adaptive (Tittenbrun, 2016; Dahrendorf, 1958). In the context of education, this can be seen when teachers' unions, student groups, or administrative reforms act upon latent conflicts, translating authority tensions into negotiated changes to policy and practice. Dahrendorf's idea that class lines are now organized around authority rather than simply property allows scholars to analyze schools as sites where both resistance and adaptation regularly occur.

The Randall Collins

Randall Collins brought a micro-sociological lens to Conflict Theory by examining how conflict operates through everyday social interactions. For Collins, social life is a constant negotiation of power, where individuals and groups compete for status, recognition, and resources. In the context of education, this can be observed in competition among students, teacher-student power dynamics, and institutional hierarchies that influence learning experiences. Collins has emphasized how educational stratification is closely tied to organizational and status group dynamics. He posited that schools are not just transmitters of neutral knowledge or skills but are shaped by dominant status groups to propagate their values and maintain their advantages (Collins, 1971; Malešević, 2019). This perspective underscores how educational requirements often serve as cultural selection devices: those who best internalize dominant cultural norms and forms of conduct rather than simply acquiring specific skills that are more likely to access higher-status positions. This theory extends to all forms of social stratification, framing micro-level educational interactions as arenas for ongoing negotiation and contestation over cultural and symbolic capital, reproducing broader social hierarchies across generations.

At the micro level, Marcaida (2020) analyzed student activism and found that Filipino students engage in both digital and face-to-face resistance against institutional injustices. This aligns with Collins' interactional approach, showing that everyday resistance and symbolic struggle such as online mobilization, student movements, and petitions challenge institutional hierarchies and reshape the boundaries of authority in education. Further, Mabunga (2019) and Evangelista (2021) studied conflict management among administrators in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), revealing that administrative power often suppresses dissent rather than fostering participatory governance. These findings underscore Dahrendorf's claim that authority distribution inherently produces organizational tension that, when repressed, may resurface as collective resistance. Internationally, comparative studies across European universities (Gómez et al., 2022) show that constructive conflict resolution mechanisms such as democratic student representation can transform institutional distrust into cooperative reform. These findings affirm the Conflict Theory perspective that tensions within educational institutions, while disruptive, are necessary precursors to structural and cultural change.

Collins emphasized that those in power not only control material resources but also shape belief systems such as grading standards, academic discourse, and definitions of "success." These symbolic forms of power maintain inequality and limit opportunities for others. However, everyday resistance such as student advocacy, collaborative learning, or critical pedagogy challenges these hierarchies and fosters social transformation from below. While existing studies affirm that power and inequality persist in educational institutions, three major gaps remain.

First, few studies have examined how authority structures such as policy control, faculty governance, and grading systems directly contribute to class-based educational inequality. Most Philippine research focuses on descriptive accounts of leadership and activism rather than integrating class and authority as measurable predictors. Second, there is a limited research on how micro-level resistance (e.g., student activism, unionization, critical pedagogy) leads to macro-level reforms in academic institutions. This leaves open the question of whether resistance translates to structural redistribution of power or merely symbolic inclusion. Third, while conflict is often framed as negative in institutional culture, Conflict Theory reframes it as a force for innovation and transformation. Yet, most local studies view academic conflict only as a management issue, not as a sociological process that reflects deeper struggles over capital, identity, and authority. Thus, by relating this study within Marx's, Dahrendorf's, and Collins' perspectives, the research addresses how power dynamics, class struggle, and resistance shape the educational landscape revealing education as both a reason of inequality and a potential site of transformative change.

Conflict Theory reminds us that meaningful social change often grows out of tension rather than agreement. Within the academic system, persistent issues such as inequality, competition, and authority struggles should not be dismissed as flaws but rather understood as signs of a system that is constantly evolving and redefining itself. Drawing from the ideas of Karl Marx, Ralf Dahrendorf, and Randall Collins, this study seeks to illuminate how education functions in two opposing yet interrelated ways: as a mechanism that reinforces oppression and domination, and as a transformative space where individuals can question authority, challenge inequality, and exercise resistance toward empowerment.

The distribution of authority within schools between administrators, teachers, and students reveals how academic systems mirror the class struggles found in broader society. Those in positions of authority often define what constitutes legitimate knowledge, academic success, and acceptable behavior, reinforcing existing hierarchies. Meanwhile, those in subordinate positions like teachers and students may internalize or contest these power dynamics through everyday forms of resistance, such as critical dialogue, academic advocacy, or participatory reforms in this way, conflict, therefore, becomes a catalyst for social change, driving movements that call for inclusivity, equity, and democratic participation in education.

Feminist Conflict Theory

Contemporary sociological extensions of conflict theory incorporate intersectionality, emphasizing how class, gender, and identity intersect to shape educational power relations. Feminist conflict theory critiques how educational institutions reproduce patriarchal hierarchies that restrict women's leadership and agency. While women make up over 70% of teachers in Philippine basic education, they remain underrepresented in senior

academic leadership positions, holding only 35% of deanships and 28% of top administrative posts (UNESCO, 2022; PCW, 2022). Scholars such as Hega et al. (2019), and Cerenado (2022) argue that these disparities reflect gendered divisions of labor embedded in educational organizations.

Feminist pedagogy, as implemented in Philippine classrooms, aims to counter these inequities by promoting inclusive dialogue, shared authority, and transformative learning. Cerenado (2022) found that feminist teaching strategies enhance classroom participation and critical thinking among marginalized learners. Similarly, the Philippine Commission on Women (2022) reported that gender-sensitive pedagogical practices foster safer and more collaborative learning environments, particularly in STEM fields where women are underrepresented.

In parallel, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy reframes education as a process of conscientization developing learners' awareness of systemic oppression and capacity for transformative action. Filipino scholars such as Villanueva (2021), Ramos (2024), and Moratilla (2019) have applied Freirean principles to cultivate critical citizenship within resource-constrained schools. However, resistance remains: performance-oriented accountability frameworks and rigid curricula often inhibit dialogical and participatory pedagogy (Asian Journal of Contemporary Education, 2021).

Conflict Theory for Educational Reform

Conflict Theory reminds us that tension within schools and universities is not always negative, it can be a necessary way for growth and change. Rather than silencing disagreement or avoiding difficult conversations, administrators and policymakers should see conflict as a sign that reform is needed. Real progress begins when decision-making becomes more inclusive, allowing both teachers and students to take part in shaping policies, curricula, and institutional priorities. Open communication and transparency help build trust, while clear lines of authority prevent hidden frustrations from turning into deeper divisions. Leadership must likewise be culturally responsive, recognizing and celebrating diversity while empowering marginalized voices. Schools should embrace, not fear, dissent by providing safe spaces for critical dialogue and collective problem-solving. At the classroom level, adopting critical pedagogy invites students to question, analyze, and understand the power structures that shape their education. Through this, learners become more engaged, aware, and capable of driving social change. Future research can deepen these insights by measuring how authority, participation, and activism affect student outcomes and institutional well-being.

Through this theoretical lens, conflict is not inherently destructive but rather a productive force that exposes contradictions within the system and opens avenues for reform. It allows us to see how domination and resistance coexist, shaping the trajectory of academic institutions and influencing how individuals experience power within them.

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