A CONFLICT THEORY ANALYSIS OF POWER RELATIONS AND CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION INEQUALITY AMONG GRADE 12 SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS OF SURIGAO CITY NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This study examined classroom participation inequality among Grade 12 students at Surigao City National High School through the lens of Conflict Theory. Using a descriptive–correlational survey design, 215 students across four academic strands completed a researcher-made questionnaire measuring socioeconomic status (SES), perceived teacher treatment, and classroom participation. Results indicated that students from higher SES backgrounds demonstrated greater engagement and received more favorable attention from teachers, while low-SES students showed lower participation due to limited resources, lower self-confidence, and perceived inequities in teacher treatment. Correlational analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between SES and classroom participation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), with teacher practices moderately associated with participation ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$). One-Way ANOVA confirmed significant differences in participation across SES groups. Findings suggest that classroom interactions reproduce broader social inequalities, highlighting the need for equitable teaching strategies and structural interventions to support meaningful participation for all students.

Keywords: Conflict Theory, Participation, Socio-Economic, Inequality, Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely regarded as a key mechanism for promoting social mobility, personal development, and national progress. However, conflict theorists challenge the assumption that schooling operates as a neutral or equalizing institution. From this perspective, schools do not merely transmit knowledge but also reproduce existing social inequalities rooted in class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Rather than narrowing social gaps, the educational system is viewed as reinforcing the status quo by socializing students into roles that mirror their social positions, thereby maintaining the dominance of elite groups and marginalizing those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Lumen; Wienclaw, 2021).

One of the most influential explanations of this process is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which refers to the cultural knowledge, skills, language styles, and dispositions that enable individuals to navigate institutional environments effectively. Students from middle- and upper-class families typically possess higher levels of cultural capital, allowing them to align more closely with school expectations and norms. In contrast, students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds often enter classrooms with fewer institutionalized resources, limiting their access to academic opportunities regardless of their motivation or intellectual ability. This dynamic results in what sociologists' term social class reproduction, wherein the advantages of the privileged are continually reinforced through schooling.

Empirical studies further illustrate the long-term consequences of these inequalities. Roksa and Kinsley (2019) found that students from low-income families have significantly lower chances of completing a bachelor's degree compared to their more affluent peers, despite the central role of higher education in achieving upward mobility. Given that educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of lifetime earnings, health outcomes, and overall well-being (Abel & Dietz, 2019; Kim et al., 2018; Warren et al., 2020), understanding how inequalities are generated within everyday classroom processes is critical.

Classroom participation, particularly in whole-class discussions, is a key context in which power relations and inequality become visible. Whole-class discussions provide opportunities to observe how students from different socioeconomic backgrounds engage with learning tasks and how teachers and peers respond to them. Research indicates that peer attitudes significantly shape students' engagement (Fredricks et al., 2005; Wang & Eccles, 2012b; Wang et al., 2018). When middle- and high-SES students are perceived as more competent or intelligent, they are more likely to be encouraged, positively evaluated, and further engaged, reinforcing their academic confidence and participation. Conversely, low-SES students are often constrained by pervasive class-based stereotypes portraying

them as less capable (Durante & Fiske, 2017; Fiske et al., 2002), which can undermine their willingness to participate and their perceived legitimacy as contributors in classroom discourse. These stereotypes also shape teachers' practices.

The aim of this study is to analyze power relations and classroom participation inequality among Grade 12 Senior High School students of Surigao City National High School through the lens of conflict theory. By examining how socioeconomic status, class-based stereotypes, teacher practices, and peer perceptions intersect within whole-class discussions, this research aims to uncover how everyday classroom interactions contribute to the reproduction of social inequality and to provide empirical grounding for more equitable educational practices.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to examine classroom participation inequality among Grade 12 senior high school students using Conflict Theory. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the socioeconomic profile of Grade 12 students in terms of parents' education, family income, and access to learning resources?
2. What is the level of classroom participation and perceived teacher treatment among the students?
3. Is there a significant relationship between students' socioeconomic status and classroom participation?
4. Which factor (1) socioeconomic status or (2) perceived teacher treatment best predicts classroom participation inequality?

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive–correlational survey design to examine the relationship between students' socioeconomic status (SES) and their classroom participation, as well as how teacher practices and power relations contribute to participation inequality. The descriptive component determined the levels of SES, teacher support, and classroom participation among Grade 12 students, while the correlational component analyzed the relationships among these variables.

Research Respondents

The respondents of this study were Grade 12 Senior High School students of Surigao City National High School (SCNHS) enrolled during the School Year 2025–2026. The total population consisted of 478 students distributed across the four academic strands: 105 STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics students, 190 GAS (General Academic Strand) students, 47 HUMSS (Humanities and Social Sciences) students, and 136 TVL (Technical-Vocational-Livelihood) students. To ensure representation from each strand, the study employed a stratified random sampling method, selecting respondents proportionately according to the size of their respective strand.

Using Slovin's formula at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, the required sample size was calculated to be approximately 215 students. The distribution of the sample across the strands is shown below (Table 1):

Table 1: Sample Distribution Across Strand Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their answers would remain confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

Strand	Full Name	Total Population	Sample Size (Approx. 45%)
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics	105	47
GAS	General Academic Strand	190	86
HUMSS	Humanities and Social Sciences	47	21
TVL	Technical-Vocational-Livelihood	136	61
Total		**478**	**215**

Research Instrument

The researcher developed a researcher-made questionnaire specifically designed to address the objectives of the study. The instrument was constructed to measure three key variables: socioeconomic status, perceived teacher treatment, and classroom participation among Grade 12 senior high school students. The questionnaire is composed of three parts. Part 1 gathers demographic information to describe the respondents' socioeconomic profile, including parents' highest educational attainment, estimated monthly family income, and the availability of learning resources at home, such as internet connection, laptop or computer, and a designated study space.

Part 2 assesses students' classroom participation through statements rated on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates "Strongly Disagree" and 5 indicates "Strongly Agree." Sample items include statements such as "I feel

confident expressing my ideas in class," "I actively participate in classroom discussions," "Only a few students dominate classroom discussions," and "I feel comfortable asking questions when I am confused." Part 3 evaluates perceived teacher treatment, also using a five-point Likert scale, with items that measure students' perceptions of fairness, attention, and support from their teachers. Example statements include "Teachers give more attention to high-achieving students," "Students from wealthy families are treated more favorably," "My teacher treats all students equally," and "I feel overlooked because of my background."

The questionnaire was validated by three experts in education and research methodology to ensure its content and construct validity. The validation process focused on clarity, alignment with the research objectives, and appropriateness of the Likert scale for measuring the constructs. Recommendations from the validators were incorporated to improve the instrument. Additionally, a pilot test was conducted with 15–20 Grade 12 students from a different section to assess reliability. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of 0.70 or higher considered acceptable for this study.

For scoring, the socioeconomic profile responses were numerically coded, such as assigning 1 to "Elementary," 2 to "High School," 3 to "College," and 4 to "Postgraduate" for parents' education. The Likert-scale items for classroom participation and perceived teacher treatment were scored from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating higher participation or more favorable teacher treatment. The results from all parts of the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively to determine patterns of classroom participation inequality among the students.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data for this study were collected through a survey using a structured, researcher-made questionnaire. Before conducting the actual survey, the researcher sought permission from the school administration of Surigao City National High School to conduct the research. Upon approval, coordination was made with the Grade 12 strand advisers of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), GAS (General Academic Strand), HUMSS (Humanities and Social Sciences), and TVL (Technical-Vocational-Livelihood) to schedule the administration of the questionnaires. Respondents were selected using a stratified random sampling method, ensuring proportional representation from each strand. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaires, the purpose and significance of the study were explained to the selected students. They were informed that participation was voluntary, their responses would remain confidential, and they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The researcher-made questionnaire was then administered in the respondents' classrooms, with the researcher present to clarify any questions and ensure that responses were completed independently. Completed questionnaires were immediately collected, checked for completeness, and any inconsistencies were clarified with the respondents. All data were subsequently coded, organized, and entered into a database for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaires were systematically organized, coded, and analyzed using Jamovi software. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were used to determine the levels of socioeconomic status (SES), teacher practices, and classroom participation among the respondents. To examine the relationships between students' SES and their classroom participation, as well as the relationship between teacher practices and classroom participation, Pearson Product–Moment Correlation was employed. Furthermore, to determine whether there were significant differences in classroom participation across students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. All statistical tests were evaluated at a 0.05 level of significance, and the results were interpreted to identify the extent to which socioeconomic status and teacher practices influence classroom participation and contribute to participation inequality among Grade 12 students at Surigao City National High School.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The succeeding tables present the results of the study.

Socioeconomic Profile of Respondents

Table 2 shows the socioeconomic profile of the 215 respondents. The majority of students' parents completed high school (45.6%), followed by college (30.2%), elementary (18.6%), and postgraduate education (5.6%). Most families earned ₱10,001–₱20,000 per month (43.3%), while 25.6% earned below ₱10,000, 23.3% earned ₱20,001–₱30,000, and only 7.9% earned above ₱30,000. In terms of learning resources, 65.1% had access to an internet connection, 41.9% had a laptop or computer, and 34.9% had their own study space.

Table 2: Socioeconomic Profile of Grade 12 Students (N = 215)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Parents' Highest Educational Attainment			
Elementary	40	18.6	
High School	98	45.6	
College	65	30.2	
Postgraduate	12	5.6	
Estimated Monthly Family Income			
Below ₱10,000	55	25.6	
₱10,001 – ₱20,000	93	43.3	
₱20,001 – ₱30,000	50	23.3	
Above ₱30,000	17	7.9	
Learning Resources Available at Home			
Internet Connection	140	65.1	
Laptop / Computer	90	41.9	
Own Study Space	75	34.9	

These findings suggest that a large portion of students come from low- to middle-income families with moderate parental educational attainment and limited learning resources. According to conflict theory, these material and cultural limitations may reduce students' classroom participation and contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986; Wienclaw, 2021).

Classroom Participation

Table 3 presents the mean scores for Classroom Participation (Part 2). Overall, respondents exhibited moderate engagement, with behavioral participation (e.g., actively participating in discussions) averaging around 3.0, and emotional and cognitive engagement slightly higher for items like "Only a few students dominate classroom discussions" (mean = 3.5) and "I feel invisible during class discussions" (mean = 3.3). Lower scores on items such as "I am encouraged to participate regardless of my background" (mean = 2.9) indicate that many students, particularly those from lower SES backgrounds, feel less supported and less visible in classroom interactions.

Table 3: Mean Scores of Classroom Participation

No.	Statement	Mean	Interpretation
PART 2 – Classroom Participation Scale			
1	I feel confident expressing my ideas in class.	3.2	Moderate
2	I actively participate in classroom discussions.	3.0	Moderate
3	I hesitate to speak because others are more capable.	2.8	Moderate (low tendency)
4	Only a few students dominate classroom discussions.	3.5	Moderate-High
5	I feel comfortable asking questions when I do not understand.	3.1	Moderate
6	My opinions are taken seriously by my teacher.	3.0	Moderate
7	I am encouraged to participate regardless of my background.	2.9	Moderate (low encouragement)

| 8 | I feel invisible during class discussions. | 3.3 | Moderate-High |

Legend:

1.00–1.79 – Very Low | 1.80–2.59 – Low | 2.60–3.39 – Moderate | 3.40–4.19 – High | 4.20–5.00 – Very High

These results reflect how power dynamics in the classroom influence participation, where a few confident or higher-status students dominate discussions, while others, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, remain hesitant or overlooked. This supports conflict theory's assertion that education systems perpetuate existing inequalities through both material and social structures (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019).

Perceived Teacher Treatment

Respondents' perceptions of teacher practices (Part 3) are also shown in Table 4. High mean scores were reported for statements indicating teacher favoritism toward high-achieving or wealthier students, such as "Teachers give more attention to high-achieving students" (3.7) and "Students from wealthy families are treated more favorably" (3.8). In contrast, items indicating equal treatment, such as "My teacher treats all students equally" (2.9) and "I receive the same learning opportunities as my classmates" (3.0), scored lower.

Table 4 – Perceived Teacher Treatment Scale

1	Teachers give more attention to high-achieving students.	3.7	High
2	Students from wealthy families are treated more favorably.	3.8	High
3	My teacher treats all students equally.	2.9	Moderate
4	I feel overlooked because of my background.	3.2	Moderate-High
5	Teachers believe more in students who perform well academically.	3.6	High
6	Classroom rules are applied fairly to everyone.	3.1	Moderate
7	I receive the same learning opportunities as my classmates.	3.0	Moderate
8	Some students are favored by teachers.	3.5	Moderate-High

Legend:

1.00–1.79 – Very Low | 1.80–2.59 – Low | 2.60–3.39 – Moderate | 3.40–4.19 – High | 4.20–5.00 – Very High

These findings suggest that teacher practices, even unintentionally, reinforce socioeconomic disparities in classroom participation. Low-SES students perceive themselves as being overlooked, while high-SES students receive more encouragement and recognition, consistent with the structural view of power relations in conflict theory (Lumen; Abel & Dietz, 2019).

Differences by Socioeconomic Status

Table 5 shows classroom participation and perceived teacher treatment by SES group. High-SES students exhibited the highest classroom participation (mean = 3.9, High), while middle-SES students scored moderately (mean = 3.3), and low-SES students scored the lowest (mean = 2.8, Moderate-Low). Similarly, perceived teacher treatment favored high-SES students (mean = 3.7, High), with low-SES students perceiving more favoritism toward their higher-status peers (mean = 3.5, Moderate-High).

Table 5: Mean Scores of Classroom Participation and Perceived Teacher Treatment by Socioeconomic Status

SES Group	Classroom Participation Mean	Interpretation	Perceived Teacher Treatment Mean	Interpretation
Low SES (n = 82)	2.8	Moderate-Low	3.5	Moderate-High
Middle SES (n = 91)	3.3	Moderate	3.3	Moderate

| High SES (n = 42) | 3.9 | High | 3.7 | High |

Legend:

1.00–1.79 – Very Low | 1.80–2.59 – Low | 2.60–3.39 – Moderate | 3.40–4.19 – High | 4.20–5.00 – Very High

Pearson Product–Moment Correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between SES and classroom participation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$). Teacher practices were moderately correlated with participation ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that supportive and fair teaching can enhance participation, though SES continues to influence who benefits most. One-Way ANOVA confirmed significant differences in participation across SES groups ($F = 34.76$, $p < 0.01$), with post hoc tests showing that low-SES students participated significantly less than middle- and high-SES students.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study illustrate that socioeconomic status and teacher practices significantly influence classroom participation among Grade 12 students at SCNHS. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds consistently demonstrated lower engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, which can be attributed to limited access to learning resources, lower self-confidence, and perceived inequities in teacher attention. Conversely, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds enjoyed greater participation opportunities, received more recognition from teachers, and demonstrated higher confidence in classroom interactions. These results align with previous studies emphasizing that students' social and economic backgrounds shape their classroom experiences and opportunities for engagement (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay, 2004; Archer et al., 2010).

From a Conflict Theory perspective, these patterns reveal that the classroom functions as a microcosm of broader social inequalities. Students from higher socioeconomic status benefit from access to cultural and material capital, which enhances participation and reinforces their advantage, while students from lower-status backgrounds are constrained by structural barriers and differential treatment by teachers. This is consistent with the literature on symbolic violence and hidden curriculum, which suggests that educational institutions often reproduce social hierarchies by privileging certain students while marginalizing others (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Anyon, 1980; Lareau, 2003). Classroom participation, therefore, is not merely a measure of individual ability or motivation, but a reflection of power relations and institutionalized inequality.

The study underscores the need for equitable teaching practices that consciously address these disparities. Strategies may include actively encouraging participation from low-SES students, providing balanced attention and feedback, and offering supplemental resources to mitigate material and cultural disadvantages. Moreover, promoting inclusivity requires not only classroom-level interventions but also structural reforms that address systemic inequities, such as differentiated resource allocation, teacher training on equity and unconscious bias, and policies that foster democratic participation for all students. Implementing such measures is essential for creating educational environments that are socially just and enable all students to participate meaningfully, regardless of socioeconomic background.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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