

# LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE APPROACH TO THE POOR STUDENTS' EDUCATION IN THE USA

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims at outlining the reactions to the Coleman's 1966 report, 'Equality of education' regarding the gap between the scores achieved by the rich and poor students in the USA at the standardized tests which generated antagonist educational agendas according to the liberal and conservative political visions upon education. The paper discusses the different perspectives on the topic.*

**Key words:** *conservative, liberal, poverty, school achievements, education.*

## 1. Introduction

From 1964 to 1965, the sociological analyses showed a very unpleasant social situation in the USA—an unbalanced sharing of revenue. The rich population of the United States (20% of the total population) received 40% of the gross domestic product, and the very poor (20%) only 5% of it (Census Bureau).

Michael Harrington in his work *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, considered that American nation was divided into two cultures: the culture of the rich and the culture of the poor (Harrington, 1997).

James Coleman, from John Hopkins University, was chosen to design, administrate and analyze a study regarding equal opportunities in American public education. The study entitled, *Equality of Education*, showed that the scores obtained on standardized tests by American students depend more on the socio-economic background of the family rather than any other factor (Coleman et al., 1966).

Because the unqualified rural population of the United States was migrating to great cities in search of jobs, education in cities registered a decrease in the level of acquisition of basic skills (reading, writing, arithmetic). This matter became more noticeable in the 1960's, largely because the standardized test scores of each school were compiled by school boards authorities and were made public. It seemed that there were obvious causes leading to such disappointing scores. Poor parents with a low level of education transmitted these characteristics to their children.

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Education of poor students was perceived differently by American administration according to their political doctrine.

## **2. Liberal Approach to the Education of Poor Students**

Two liberal administrations are considered to be illustrative in this case, being responsible to use education for launching the War on Poverty, J. F. Kennedy administration and Lyndon Johnson Administration.

### **2.1. Poor students` education during J. F. Kennedy administration**

The cycle of poverty gained popularity with the publication of G. Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*. This study published in 1940, described the poverty among the black population as a set of interdependent factors. For example, a poor education restricts job opportunities, having as a result a low living standard, which in turn would generate precarious living conditions, diet and medical care for the next generation (Myrdal, 2009). This cyclical pattern suggests that the fight against poverty may start from any point in the cycle of interdependent causal relationships (Myrdal, 2009).

The model captured the attention of Kennedy administration in the early 1960's. The idea of a federal program against unemployment and poverty came directly from President J.F. Kennedy, who in 1962 asked Walter Heller, chairman of economic advisers, to prepare a report based on concrete statistics about poverty in the United States. At the same time, he asked for copies of the recently published work *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, by Michael Harrington, who considered the isolation of the poor from the rest of America would divide the nation into two cultures: the culture of the rich and the culture of the poor (Harrington, 1997). President Kennedy decided to launch a war against poverty by 1963 and to attack the social structures responsible for its growth.

Walter Heller made a series of statistics relating to the causes that generate poverty and began developing plans for solving them. In 1964 his report was published, *The Problem of Poverty in America*, where he claimed that poverty was directly related to education. The main cause for low wages was low productivity, which in turn reflected the low level of education among the labor force:

*'The severely handicapping influence of lack education is clear. The incidence of poverty drops as educational attainment rise for nonwhites as well as white families at all ages'* (Heller, 1964, 15).

Meanwhile, the sociological study, *Equality of Education*, conducted by Prof. James Coleman, showed that the scores obtained on tests depended more on the socio-economic background of the family rather than any other factor (Coleman, 1966).

From this perspective, Heller's report highlighted the need for equalizing educational opportunities.

*'Equality of opportunity is the American dream, and universal education our noblest pledge to realize it. But, for the children of the poor, education is a handicap race, many are too ill motivated at home to learn at school'* (Heller, 1964, 65).

## **2.2. Poor students' education during Lyndon Johnson Administration**

On January 8th, 1964, President L. Johnson, in his message about the state of the nation, passed a declaration to Congress whereby he launched an unconditional war against poverty, thus reinforcing his predecessor's (i.e. J.F. Kennedy's) initiatives.

Since poverty was a national phenomenon, the Congress' response to the problem was to pass *The Economic Opportunity Act* in 1964 (<https://uscode.house.gov/statutes/pl/88/452.pdf>) and *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in 1965 (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/nonpublic/eseareauth.pdf>).

The most important programs of The Economic Opportunity Act were The Job Corps and Head Start.

*The Job Corps* represented a unique solution to the youth problem. First, it aimed to reduce unemployment amongst them by offering them residence and training programs. In these programs young people were trained to work in governmental projects.

*Head Start* was based on the premise that children from non-affluent backgrounds were disadvantaged in terms of learning opportunities. The program provided access to adequate education from early childhood onwards and gave poor children a chance to enter the social selection process on the same terms with children from more affluent backgrounds. The education of children from the base of the social pyramid required special methods and higher costs. Referring to the plans of Head Start, Heller, in his report, insisted on the fact that equal opportunities 'must start on a pre-school basis and include a broad range of more intensive services' (Heller, 1964, 68).

This program was received with enthusiasm and in the summer of 1965 about 560,000 children were included in it.

*The Elementary and Secondary Education Act* was signed by President Johnson on April 11, 1967. It provided financial support for the improvement of disadvantaged children's educational programs.

Initially, 1 billion dollars a year was provided. From this fund, money would be allocated to each school with a substantial proportion of students who came from families whose income was below the poverty threshold. These funds were on average 150 U.S. dollars/disadvantaged student.

It is questionable whether, in these circumstances, educational reform is not the most conservative social reform. This was one of the allegations against the idea that school alone can end poverty in America. To believe so is considered by the critics a way to avoid fundamental economic problems. If you look only at the revenue distribution in the mid-1990's we can observe the same discrepancy: very rich people (1/5 of total population) got 48.2% of GDP, while the poor population

(1/5) only 3.6%. Therefore, it is obvious that the essential problem could not be resolved (Census Bureau).

The educational component of the war on poverty claimed that higher levels of education among the poor would have as direct consequences better-paid jobs. A shortcoming of this theory is that higher education does not necessarily entail increased salaries. Society will always need people for menial work. In terms of social reform, it can be concluded that education alone cannot resolve the problem of poverty; effective reform must consist in direct changes in the work organization and in the structure of the economic system.

### **3. Conservative Approach to the poor students` education**

For the conservative approach Nixon Administration was chosen, considering it the most illustrative for the topic.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, President Nixon's counselor, started also from the Coleman report, related to social impact on education, written to meet the requirements of chapter four of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that would give to the commissioner of education the responsibility to promote and implement equality of chances in American education. The report linked the students' background to their national test scores. Excepting Asian Americans, other minority students acquired scores much lower than white students, and these differences were growing from 1st grade to 12th grade. 'For most minority groups ... schools provide little opportunity for them to overcome ... initial deficiency' (Coleman et al., 1966).

Moynihan launched an attack on social scientists as well as against federal education programs. 'Social scientists would always be on the side of the poor and minorities' (Moynihan, 1973, p. 175). In 1970, Moynihan demanded increased funding for education research, and for educational programs. This meant that governmental education policies had to be validated by scientific research before being implemented. In 1970, the National Institute of Education appeared. Moynihan believed that educational research demonstrated that nothing could be done for school to improve scores of students from the lower class and, therefore, it was not appropriate for the funds allotted by the Federal Government to be spent for such purposes; therefore, more funds were required for research and less for schools (Moynihan, 1973).

During the Nixon administration, money was given to educational experts, and the concern for the poor' lives was reduced. Government funds were taken from beneficiaries and given to experts. Development of the movement for measuring students' achievements is a good example. In fact, the movement in favor of accountability was a reaction against the extension of community control on schools.

The concept of community control on the school community was developed to end racism and discrimination in schools. Minority groups believed that racism existed in schools because the community had little power on schools, in terms of employing teaching staff, spending funds and organizing curriculum.

The accountability movement restored professional educators' power. Supervision made by experts is an important theme of Leon Lessinger's book, *Every Kid - A Winner: Accountability in education*, which considers the community control a threat to the quality of education. Lessinger claimed that 'modern schooling is based on professional knowledge gained through research and study' (Lessinger, 1970, p. 166). The ordinary member of a community does not have the necessary preparation to make correct educational decisions. Experts in education should be entrusted with the power of decision. Even with this trust given to the experts, Lessinger acknowledges that the school must respond publicly. The school must report its achievements and failures to the public (Lessinger, 1970).

Score publication is the core of the accountability movement. Once the accountability movement had spread out in the early 1970s, local communities and states asked schools to make the results of annual tests public. Using test scores to measure the success of schools, the power remained in the hands of educational experts. Testing became a central part of the teaching process.

Increased interest in standardized testing led to an increased importance of behaviorism theory and of teaching in accordance with the setting of specific objectives, which along with education focused on developing career, represented the fundamental features that characterized educational policy during conservative administrations.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The Federal Government led by liberal administrations launched a real war on poverty. This war included three major areas of interest: juvenile delinquents and the unemployed, disadvantaged students, and the cycle of poverty.

In contrast the conservatives believed that educational research demonstrated that nothing could be done for school to improve scores of students from the lower class and, therefore, it was not appropriate for the funds allotted by the Federal Government to be spent for such purposes; therefore, more funds were required for research and less for schools

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