

## The Impact of Low Socio-economic Status on the Degree of Motivation and Autonomous Behaviors of Turkish Adult Students

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**ABSTRACT** Low socio-economic status, poverty, or social-economic gap may have undesirable effects on the emotional state of individuals at any age during education process and may be the grounds of negative consequences in terms of individuals' academic failure, demotivation, and poor autonomous behaviors. Therefore, in this paper, it was aimed to investigate the impact of low socio-economic status, as one of the risk factors, on motivation levels and autonomous behaviors of adult student teachers attending a Turkish university. In the paper, a demographic information form and semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The results indicated that low socio-economic status -SES- students perceived themselves as diverse from their schoolmates and felt depressed and demotivated on educational matters, since they encountered various difficulties while affording the learning materials and individual needs such as accommodation, food, transportation, and clothing.

### INTRODUCTION

The gap between individuals' own social and economic status may cause some deficits both in their education process and in their social relationships. Individuals can easily figure out their status, whether social or economic; they also begin to compare their own status with their peers (Devlin et al. 2016). If they recognize they have less economic income than their peers, they may easily experience emotional trauma due to the limitations of such situation (Dempsey et al. 2000), and because of poverty related stresses, a person's development could be affected negatively (Kaiser and Delaney 1996).

Low socio-economic status -SES- or poverty is an issue that has been delineated as a risk factor with a number of challenges in education process (Leroy and Symes 2001). Academic failure is among such problems. Children from poor families may become less successful than their economically advantaged peers, because their parents may not have more time and money to invest in them (Kalil et al. 2016). Low-SES is also assumed to be influential on an individual's undesirable perceptions, interactions, and relationships such as avoiding interaction with others, revealing feelings of hopelessness, and not trusting people around them (Haberman 2005; Woolfolk 2010) due to the insufficient high-quality facilities offered them during childhood that enhance cognitive, social, cultural, and intellectual

development. That is, low socio-economic students tend to be the low-performing students in the general education classroom (Roberts 2015). Another problem is demotivation in education process; as Meng-Hsiang and colleagues (2015) declare motivational factors may be shaped by the level of income.

In the literature, low-SES has been discussed from different perspectives: for instance, Payne (2005) maintains that poverty is the stance in which an individual is short of financial resources, thus emotional, physical, and even spiritual scarcities. Citing the studies of Gutman et al. (2003) and Berliner (2005), Woolfolk (2010) emphasizes that high-socio-economic status -SES- of all ethnic groups show higher average levels of achievement on test scores and stay in school longer than low-SES students. Additionally, Woolfolk (2010) proclaims that, in some cases, low-SES students refuse some cooperative behaviors with their teachers and friends, and even they reject participating in school activities and attending school. Thus, financial deficiency may lead to academic failure and school dropouts.

The research conducted on the correlation between low-SES and low achievement in recent years has mostly reported remarkable results. Analyzing the studies, Schuetz et al. (2016) declare that students from low income are more likely to leave education without a certificate or degree. Gizir (2009) examined the environmental protective factors that support academic resilience

among the low SES eighth-grade students in Turkey and found out that high expectations about home, school caring, peer caring relationships, academic abilities, an internal locus of control, and the future were the major external factors and internal factors. Buz and colleagues (2012) investigated the opinions of social work students about poverty and wealth and ascertained that students preferred to provide structural explanations to interpret poverty and wealth, but they did not mention economic and social inequality in their interpretations. Lacour and Tissington (2011) searched for the impact of poverty on academic achievement and concluded that poverty has negative effects on academic achievement because of inadequate resources necessary for student achievement. Herbers et al. (2012) investigated the significance of early academic achievement for later academic achievement among the students and emphasized that the early emergence of achievement gaps due to poverty creates risk for their later academic status and achievement. Referring to the research studies on poverty and education, Conradi et al. (2015) emphasized that low family income has negative impacts on reading achievement. In their study, Meng-Hsiang et al. (2015) concluded that access to social media is interrelated with the level of personal income. To conclude, the studies that have searched for the impact of low-SES or poverty on academic achievement echo similar voices from different perspectives.

### Objectives

The poverty threshold may vary from one country to another, but individuals suffer from

the results of poverty in similar fashions. Therefore, in this paper, it was aimed to have an in-depth understanding of the impacts of low-SES on a sample of student teachers in Turkey in terms of motivation/demotivation/autonomous predispositions.

### Living Standards and Household Income Rates in Turkey

The high-SES and low-SES or poverty rates are searched by governments and documented regularly to pursue the situation. The recent survey report on living standards documented in Turkey is presented in Table 1.

According to Çalik's report (2014) as indicated in Table 1, the share of the highest income group (the fifth group) is 46.6 percent, while the share for the first groups is 5.9 percent as the lowest income rate. For urban and rural regions, S80/S20 indicator is calculated as 7.2, and Gini coefficient is found out to be 0.391 for urban and 0.377 for rural settlements. According to Income and Living Conditions Survey conducted by *TURKSTAT* –Turkish Statistical Institution- in 2013 and announced in September, 2014 at *TURKSTAT*'s web site, the average household disposable income per year was 26.577 TL, whereas average annual household disposable income was 11.859 TL. The sample size for this survey was 21.815 households.

In Turkey, the efforts to struggle against poverty which forms the way of life and culture of individuals as a worldwide matter were officially initiated in the 1990s (Saatçi and Akpınar 2007). It has also been reported that recent years have witnessed significant improvements in Turkey, which is a middle income country in terms of increased literacy rates, high level of life expectancy, fallen

**Table 1: Household disposable income- 2011-2012**

| Quintiles             | Turkey |       | Urban |       | Rural |       |
|-----------------------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                       | 2011   | 2012  | 2011  | 2012  | 2011  | 2012  |
| Total                 | 100.0  | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| First 20%             | 5.8    | 5.9   | 6.2   | 6.4   | 6.1   | 6.1   |
| Second 20%            | 10.6   | 10.6  | 10.8  | 10.9  | 10.9  | 11.2  |
| Third 20%             | 15.2   | 15.3  | 15.2  | 15.3  | 15.7  | 15.9  |
| Fourth 20%            | 21.7   | 21.7  | 21.5  | 21.3  | 22.5  | 22.8  |
| Fifth 20%             | 46.7   | 46.6  | 46.2  | 46.1  | 44.8  | 44.0  |
| Gini coefficient      | 0.404  | 0.402 | 0.394 | 0.391 | 0.385 | 0.377 |
| Share ratio (S80/S20) | 8.0    | 8.0   | 7.4   | 7.2   | 7.4   | 7.2   |

\*Income and Living Conditions Survey, 2012 available at TURKSTAT website at <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=16083>

poverty and economic vulnerability, though some very significant gaps remain due to regional disparities; for instance, 20 percent adults are still illiterate (Çalik 2014). In Turkey, poverty or low-SES seems to be directly related to low educational status (Saatçi and Akpınar 2007), mostly resulting in unemployment.

Individuals who experience low-SES may get achievement at lower levels than the others who have higher level economic status. This situation may affect their life at all ages. They may have low expectations, low-academic self-concept, and inadequate desire to learn in their learning process (Borman and Overman 2004). In other words, they may get demotivated. Thus, poverty can cause other poverties such as demotivation, less autonomy, low level of self-efficacy and self-esteem, and less success. Among those factors motivation is the chief behavior controlling learners' achievement.

#### **Low-SES and High-SES as Intrinsic and Extrinsic Sources of Motivation/Demotivation**

Motivation is a kind of affective variable and a key to success in learning process. Each person is motivated in different ways: global, situational, or task oriented (Brown 2007). Motivation is also interrelated with the type of orientation: either instrumental or integrative orientation (Dörnyei 2001). In foreign language learning, this dichotomy explains why learners of foreign language want to learn the foreign language. In instrumental orientation, the learner acquires the language as a means for accomplishing instrumental aims: furthering a career, reading technical materials, do translations, and so forth, while the integrative side is ascribed to learners who wish to be a member of the culture of the second language by integrating themselves into social interchange in that culture (Brown 2007). Whatever orientation type the learner determines for her/himself, the main motive of motivation is triggered through either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation or by both types. Intrinsically motivated learners engage in learning process without expecting external rewards; that is, the learner wants to learn the language just s/he desires to be a learner and gets the benefits of the language. But in extrinsic motivation, the learner is motivated through some external rewards such as grades, prizes, money, and etc. The research in the field of education suggests that intrinsic

sources of motivation is more powerful than extrinsic motivation and yields positive results in learning process (Dörnyei and Csizer 1998; Dörnyei 2001; Wu 2003; Ögeyik 2009). Accordingly, motivation is interrelated with the level of self-efficacy of a learner; if a learner feels himself/herself being capable enough for implementing a given task, that is, having the feeling of high self-efficacy, an appropriate degree of effort may be dedicated to success (Brown 2007). It is agreed that self-efficacy is at the basis of self-esteem, motivation, and self-regulation (Bandura 1997). High level or moderate degree of self-efficacy leads to eager and enthusiastic attitudes of students toward learning (Tuckman and Sexton 1990). As a result, such behaviors may affect the degree of learner autonomy. An autonomous learner is eager to initiate an action by taking the responsibility of learning and finding solutions to the possible problems. This learner can find his or her own way both inside and outside the classroom. For achieving autonomy, language programs emphasize the importance of self-starting and taking responsibility of learning (Benson 2001; Schmenk 2005). In other words, autonomy is a kind of variable that triggers the demand on learners to become aware of the learning and to achieve success. Respectively, triggered demand prompts motivation. In this sense, the affective domains -motivation, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and autonomy- are all interrelated and lead to success by feeding each other.

All those affective variables may also be shaped by some external motives such as the economic power of a learner. If a learner has limited opportunity in terms of economic situation, s/he may develop low level of self-efficacy, and thus, low level of motivation and autonomy (Luginbuhl et al. 2016). Conditions required for such learners may be lacking in emotional security and belief system (Payne 2005). To place such learners into successful learning environments, teachers can encourage them both for being motivated in learning process and for attaining the interest towards learning by defeating or ignoring the negative economic experiences and effects. The parental and tutorial support may also be helpful to overwhelm the negative aspects and self-image of learners (Woolfolk 2010). Through intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, they may be engaged in learning process for good reasons. Secure and respectful relationships can be introduced

into the learning community without proposing the gap between the peers who are from high income and low income families. In this respect, the teacher may be a caring guide to those learners. Teachers should acquire the required knowledge, ability, and personality to teach adequately to the students living in poverty and to have interaction with them about their conditions (Howard and Rodriguez-Scheel 2016). Teachers should investigate the economic status of the students in his or her class. Given the centrality to the perception of economic status, in this paper, the impact of low-SES, as one of the affective mechanisms, on adult students' motivation and autonomous tendencies is investigated in Turkey.

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

In the paper, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were utilized. For quantitative data collection, a simple demographic questionnaire was administered to the participants. The questionnaire included items questioning the socio-economic and demographic status of the participants and their families. The qualitative data collection was carried out by means of semi-structured interviews and classroom observation reports. The interview questions focused on the expectations and feelings of the participants about their economic status and how they were affected by their economic status in their education life in terms of motivation and autonomy.

#### Participants

The participants of the paper were 96 student teachers -79 female and 17 male-attending a Turkish University. The participants' orientation types were determined as both instrumental and integrative orientation. They attended the university to become teachers of English -for getting a career-, that is, instrumental orientation. Besides, they wanted to become a member of the English culture and community -integrative orientation.

#### Purpose and Significance of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is threefold: to have an in-depth understanding of the low-SES student teachers' motivation/demotivation/autonomous predispositions in terms of their commitment to education process; to determine the

impact of their economic status on their academic behaviors; and to make them recognize that students are the individuals who should be appraised from different perspectives in training process and should be aided for their problems, whether academic, social or financial. The treatment process was carried out as regards the expectations of the participants declared in the interview sessions.

### RESULTS

In the paper, the data were collected in three stages: the first stage was to collect demographic data about the participants' families and socio-economic status by means of a demographic information questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to scrutinize information about the participants and their families in terms of gender, age, their place of birth and residence, parents' education background, income level, work conditions, and the number of siblings. This information was required for getting a general picture of their economic conditions.

#### First Stage Data: Demographic Information Questionnaire

The data gathered through the demographic information questionnaire which was designed by the researcher are displayed in Table 2.

The participants' income level was not extremely low as depicted in Table 2, because nearly all participants declared that their parents had jobs. The figures in Table 2 validate the report of Çalik (2014) indicating that Turkey is a middle income country in terms of increased literacy rates, high level of life expectancy, and fallen poverty as displayed in Table 1. According to the data in Table 2, most of the participants came from middle class families with one sibling or two siblings and more than half of their parents were the graduates of university and secondary education. Additionally, 15.6 percent of those participants came from high class families who did not have any serious economic problems. However, 28.1 percent of the participants declared that they came from low class families; and only one of the parents in the family earned money for the family expenditure (42.7%). 76 percent had one or two siblings, while 14.6 percent had more than two siblings.

**Table 2: Socio-demographic information of students**

| <i>Demographic data</i>                  | <i>Number of students</i> | <i>%</i> |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------|
| <i>Gender</i>                            |                           |          |
| Female                                   | 79                        | 82.2     |
| Male                                     | 17                        | 17.8     |
| Total                                    | 96                        | 100.0    |
| <i>Age</i>                               |                           |          |
| 18-23                                    | 96                        | 100.0    |
| Total                                    | 96                        | 100.0    |
| <i>Place of Birth</i>                    |                           |          |
| Metropolitan                             | 21                        | 21.9     |
| City                                     | 36                        | 37.5     |
| Country                                  | 32                        | 33.3     |
| Village                                  | 7                         | 7.3      |
| Total                                    | 96                        | 100.0    |
| <i>The Place of Residence</i>            |                           |          |
| Metropolitan                             | 28                        | 29.2     |
| City                                     | 51                        | 53.2     |
| Country                                  | 10                        | 10.4     |
| Village                                  | 7                         | 7.2      |
| Total                                    | 96                        | 100.0    |
| <i>People Who Afford the Participant</i> |                           |          |
| Parents                                  | 91                        | 94.8     |
| Relatives                                | 5                         | 5.2      |
| Other                                    | -                         | -        |
| Total                                    | 96                        | 100.0    |
| <i>Family Income</i>                     |                           |          |
| High class                               | 15                        | 15.6     |
| Middle class                             | 54                        | 56.3     |
| Low class                                | 27                        | 28.1     |
| Total                                    | 96                        | 100.0    |
| <i>Parent's Education Level</i>          |                           |          |
| University                               | 26                        | 27.0     |
| Secondary school                         | 45                        | 46.9     |
| Primary school                           | 9                         | 9.4      |
| No graduation                            | 16                        | 16.7     |
| Total                                    | 96                        | 100.0    |
| <i>Number of Siblings</i>                |                           |          |
| 0                                        | 9                         | 9.4      |
| 1                                        | 21                        | 21.9     |
| 2                                        | 52                        | 54.1     |
| 2+                                       | 14                        | 14.6     |
| Total                                    | 96                        | 100.0    |
| <i>Working Family Members</i>            |                           |          |
| Father                                   | 33                        | 34.4     |
| Mother                                   | 8                         | 8.3      |
| Both mother and father                   | 45                        | 46.9     |
| Other                                    | 10                        | 10.4     |
| Total                                    | 96                        | 100.0    |

## Second Stage Data: Interviews

To search for the impacts of family income on the participants' academic achievement and social behaviors, semi-structured interview sessions were designed. The data were analyzed by means of content analysis: firstly the questions in the research form were categorized and the categories were controlled and reevaluated by two experts. In data analysis process, the same experts were worked collaboratively with the researcher to confirm the validity of the categories analysis. The inter-rater reliability was found out to be .92 which was discussed by the raters and the researcher to elucidate the ambiguous points and the perspectives about the categories. 72 out of 96 participants could attend the interview sessions; the participation in the interview sessions was about 75 percent. The sessions were carried out in three-week period and organized regarding the spare time of both the researcher and the participants. Since the participation rate was high, some sessions were carried out in the evening after the course hours. The volunteer students participated in the interview sessions; therefore, the figure was so high. The questions in the categories and the responses of the participants are summarized below:

**The Impact of Economic Status on Academic Achievement:** During the interview sessions, the participants were initially interviewed for collecting data about their general feelings and ideas regarding their economic status and its impacts on their academic achievements. The overall decision was that diversity among Turkish university students was widespread, and those who experienced low-SES perceived themselves as diverse from their schoolmates. Nearly all participants declared that economic well-being might affect their academic achievements. They stated that they came from different districts of the country and had to afford the learning materials, individual needs such as accommodation, food, transportation, clothing, and etc. Thus, when they did not have enough to afford those needs, they got depressed and felt themselves demotivated towards the courses and the school.

**Income and Expenditure Amount Per Month:** When the participants were individually questioned about their monthly income and spending, less than half (31 participants) declared that they could not afford all their needs regular-



ly. The money sent by their families was inadequate for their expenditures, and they added that they could not demand much money from their families due to their families' low economic conditions. 17 of them declared that they had some scholarships from different institutions because of the low economic income of their families, so they had serious difficulties while affording for their expenditures. The rest stated that they could afford their spending and had no difficulty in terms of life conditions and school expenses, because the parents of those participants worked in good conditions or had their own companies.

**Feelings of Low-SES Participants About School Life:** Those who were coming from low income families were separately interviewed about their feelings and behaviors towards the school life and courses when they had economic problems. Nearly all stated that they lost interest towards the school and courses; they got easily demotivated in the activities and did not have autonomous behaviors in learning process. They insisted that such demotivated behaviors and lack of autonomy affected their academic achievement negatively and caused gradual loss of interest. To verify their declarations, the academic grades of the participants coming from low-SES families were examined, and it was reported that they mostly had lower grades than the others.

**Suggestions by the Low SES Participants:** One more point in the interview sessions was to get suggestions from the participants about how such negative impacts could be defeated. Low-SES participants declared that they could be assisted by their teaching staff and school administration to defeat the negative impacts and consequences of such external effects. They demanded considerate behaviors from their teaching staff when they faced failures in the courses. They were eager to be rewarded externally when they succeeded. Besides, they demanded to have some chatting hours with their teaching staff about their problems. They also stated they would feel themselves more comfortable if they could declare the reasons of their failures and their emotional state and could share their feelings during these office hours. Nearly all low-SES participants believed such sessions would be helpful for them to overcome the difficulties they faced and they would behave autonomously and increase their self-esteem. And they claimed that they would be more motivated in the educa-

tion process and their self-efficacy levels would increase by getting assistance on the issue; thus, autonomous behaviors would be fostered.

The interview sessions with the ones coming from low-SES families and suffering from shortage of money were held twice during the research process to verify whether they were relaxed after the first interview; but no significant change was noticed. Classroom observation reports were also kept during the course hours. The participants' behaviors were observed and the changes were recorded regularly. In the classroom environment, they behaved hesitantly among their classmates. Although they seldom behaved eagerly in the classroom, they generally showed reluctant behaviors. When their motivation got decreased, they were questioned about the possible reasons. It was deduced that economic problems were among the chief reasons of the demotivation of those adult participants.

### **Third Stage Data: Solutions to the Diagnosed Problems Related with Demotivation**

To find solutions to such problems, some opportunities and supports were provided for the ones who suffered from demotivation due to the negative economic conditions. The offered assistance and aids for them are summarized below:

Small scaled funds by the teaching staff were provided for the ones who struggled with poverty. The participants were supported psychologically in the chatting sessions. During the course hours, they were encouraged to engage in the classroom activities, and some extrinsic rewards such as high grades were provided. By those manners, they were intrinsically motivated. When they could not afford the learning materials, their classmates shared the materials with them. Thus, they were not obliged to spend much on the learning materials.

## **DISCUSSION**

As discussed in the literature (Leroy and Symes 2001; Haberman 2005; Woolfolk 2010; Eyüboğlu et al. 2015; Reddy et al. 2015), poverty or low-SES is a risk factor and leads to undesirable cognitive, social, intellectual, behavioral results in education process. In the literature, low-SES has been examined from different perspectives. As Payne (2005) maintains, poverty is the

circumstance in which an individual has shortages of financial resources triggering emotional, spiritual, and even physical discomfort. In line with the discussions in the literature, the findings of this paper also indicated that low-SES led to undesirable social and emotional behaviors in education process. Such scarcities may lead to academic failure and school dropouts (Schuetz et al. 2016). In some cases, low-SES students may not involve in the activities cooperatively in school and may not be devoted themselves to school schedule (Woolfolk 2010). The findings of this present paper revealed consistent results with those decisions.

High expectations of low-SES students can appear at any age, whether adult as in this paper or younger as emphasized in other papers (Gizir 2009). Citing the studies of Gutman et al. (2003) and Berliner (2005), Woolfolk (2010) emphasizes that low-SES students stay in school shorter and become less successful than high-socio-economic status students; and low-SES students tend to leave the school without completing the education process and without getting a certificate or degree (Schuetz et al. 2016). That is, low-SES students can easily be exposed to academic failure (Lacour and Tissington 2011). The similar results were found out in this paper. Additionally, in the research process, it was observed that the low-SES student teachers were demotivated in the education process; this finding supports the idea concluded by Roberts (2015) that low socio-economic students tend to be the low-performing students in the general education classroom.

During the research process, it was also noticed that supporting the student teachers psychologically and financially could help them increase their motivation levels and academic performance. Similarly, in a paper by Melguizo et al. (2016) that searched for the impacts of a national-level subsidized loan program targeted to low-income students, it was concluded that when low-income students were subsidized, their academic performance got higher. Additionally, this paper attempted to impose the purpose that students should be appraised as competent individuals and aided whenever they need. This expectation should be a part of teacher training for educating student teachers to care for their prospective students who suffer from poverty (Haberman 2005; Xu et al. 2015; Cochran-Smith and Villegas 2016). Thus, by increasing their awareness about poverty, it was assumed that

the student teachers as prospective teachers might help their students with low SES in future.

In the literature review, it has been noticed that the voice of low-SES individuals echoes from different countries in a similar manner. The significance of this paper which focused on adult learners attending a Turkish university is that those adult learners came from different districts of Turkey and should afford their accommodation, food, transportation, clothing, school expenses, and etc. in the city where they attend university. In this respect, their motivation level might diminish at any case and their academic achievement might be low when they encounter financial problems. Therefore, it is assumed that this paper might contribute to the literature for carrying out further studies on the socio-economic status of adult learners attending university in a city far away from their hometowns and families.

## CONCLUSION

As seen in this sample research, low-SES may negatively affect anybody at any age in terms of their behaviors such as motivation, self-efficacy, and autonomy during education process. Students who suffer from low-SES may be defected emotionally. Thus, the emotional defect causes to academic failure and reluctance. It is commonly believed that an individual's physical and emotional security is interrelated with the capacity of thinking and learning. Additionally, instructional methods and techniques that are suitable for high-SES students may not be appropriate for deprived students due to low-SES. Many other troubles resulting from low-SES may emerge.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Investigating the low-SES related factors affecting achievement of students should be among the chief concerns of teachers. For finding solutions to students' economic problems, they should be consulted regularly; adequate assistance for academic and social engagement should be provided by detecting the causes of their status. Additionally, by providing students with emotional support, they can be directed to use their skills and knowledge to defeat demotivation. As well as academic purpose, the focus should also be placed on finding solutions to

individual problems. Small scaled funds should be offered for those suffering from low-SES. Some external motivating sources can be used to lend them a helping hand. Some scholarships can also be made available from various private and state institutions. Teachers should incorporate such responsibilities for assisting low-SES students into the instruction planning and try to meet the needs of those who have economic problems cooperatively with other teaching staff and the institution they work for.

### LIMITATIONS

Like many other studies in the fields of social sciences, this paper has some limitations. The paper was conducted only on one group of student teachers as a sample from one Turkish university; further studies can be carried out with the participants from different universities. As for the data collection procedures and instruments, only demographic information form and semi-structured interview forms were used; the strength of the data on the academic achievement would be measured through achievement tests to score the data quantitatively. The findings of the paper can be generalized to some extent; but for more generalization, the paper needs to be replicated and measured by means of various dependent and independent variables and by means of mixed methods research.

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