

# THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY ON HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' SOCIALIZATION IN TURKEY

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## **ABSTRACT**

*As a developing country, Turkey passes through fast economic changes. Like the rest of the world, this situation has caused inequality of income distribution, growing gap between socioeconomic classes and consequently, the increase in poverty. When the increase in the number of adolescents from low socioeconomic status families is considered, the necessity of studying those adolescents' relations with their teachers and peers becomes evident. Participants of this study consisted of 40 high school students (20 girls, 20 boys) from low SES families. In this study adolescents were interviewed about their social standing to determine how they feel about their statuses within the school and in the society in general. Data were gathered by a semi structured interview form in this study. In order to obtain detailed information by observing participants' reactions, in-depth interview technique was applied individually by the researcher, herself. Data were analyzed by content analysis.*

**Key Words:** Adolescent, high school, poverty, globalization, socialization.

## **INTRODUCTION**

“Globalization”, as a result of rapid economic and political changes, has not only economically but also socially effected societies. Today, one of the most important problems related with globalization is poverty and especially poverty of children. In the first half of 21 century, one and a half billion children in the world are living in poverty. In addition to basic needs such as sanitation, shelter and safe water, those children also can not exercise their social and developmental rights like participation to social life (UNICEF, 2005).

Poverty is defined as the inability to meet most fundamental needs in the literature. Moreover some researchers describe poverty as being hungry, being deprived of clothing and shelter, being sick but not being treated, being illiterate but not being able to go to school. Nowadays, poverty is considered as a multidimensional subject; therefore, it indicates not only low income and deprivation from basic needs but also low prosperity level due to those deprivations (White, Leavy and Masters, 2003). In this study, poverty is handled as an inability to provide social and cultural needs together with physical necessities.

Although it seems that economic intervention would largely eliminate or reduce the effects of poverty on children, in fact, more comprehensive social studies are needed. It is important for the betterment in children's current and future lives or the improve their welfare to find solutions by working on both economic and social projects. Since, child welfare, from a more expansive perspective, is necessary for general welfare of a country as well as children's.

Especially in developing countries majority of the population consists of individuals at the age of 17 and under. As the child poverty increase, country welfare drops in those countries. As a result of being a developing country Turkey goes through rapid economic changes and crisis that affects all segments of society. This situation, just like in many other countries, has caused unequal income distribution, increase in the socioeconomic class formation and consequently poverty in Turkey. Turkey has a very young population, therefore children have been the most effected group from poverty and child poverty has grown hastily. According to the 2004 Household Budget Survey of Turkish Statistical Institute, children under 15 years of age for the entire population is 28.46%, and 34.55% of these children are living in poverty (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2004).

Recently, children and adolescents' tendency to delinquency whose primary needs are not met is mentioned frequently. Specifically, children and adolescents who are ostracized or humiliated may act aggressively. Both economic inadequacies and social humiliation may make them feel themselves as outcasts and sometimes cause them feel hostility toward people from high socioeconomic classes.

In this context, it is especially important to define how children and adolescents living and going to schools within middle and high socioeconomic

districts feel themselves in the society. There are many studies emphasizing negative effects of poverty on youngsters' social, physical, emotional and cognitive developments. Particularly adolescence is an important period when individual is socialized enormously and goes through identity crises. Socialization concept is considered as an important factor in human development and is described as a complex process of the development of socially successful individuals in the literature (Buckner, Bassuk & Weinreb, 2000; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov, 1994; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Ansalone, 2001; Lent & Figueira-McDonough, 2002; Evans & English, 2002; Flores, 2004; Mackner, Black & Starr Jr., 2003; Thomas, 2002). Thus, in this study, it was aimed to determine low socioeconomic status high school students' perceptions of their social status and their socialization process.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Participants of this study consisted of 40 high school students (20 girls, 20 boys) who are between 15 to 17 years of age from low socioeconomic status (SES) families in Ankara.

In order to determine a possible gender effect, numbers of male and female participants were equaled. Therefore there were 20 male and 20 female participants in the study.

In this study, high school students from low SES families living both low and middle and high SES parts of Cankaya and Gazi Osman Pasa districts in Ankara were interviewed. There were also middle and high SES students living in that district and attending to the same public school with the participants of the study.

There were no differences between their parents' education levels or their occupations. Study group was of adolescents from low socioeconomic status families. Their mothers' were primary school graduates or drop-outs while their fathers were either primary or secondary school graduates.

All participants' parents were occupied as doorkeepers while mothers of eight students were also working as charwoman, four fathers held a second job as janitor and two fathers were peddlers.

### **Data Collection**

Data were gathered by a semi structured interview form in this study. In order to obtain detailed information by observing participants' reactions, in-depth interview technique was applied individually by the researcher, herself.

In order to determine how poverty affected participants' socialization process, firstly they were asked questions firstly about their schoolmates' and teachers' attitudes toward themselves and their relationships with those people, secondly, about their academic performances, thirdly whether they participated in and out of school social activities and about their expectations and future plans. Finally they were asked to describe themselves and how they evaluate their social status.

When their answers were not related to the question content or more definitive answers were needed, extra questions were asked.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed by content analysis. For this reason, firstly categories were formed in accordance with the questions on the research form. After controlling defined categories, researcher went on to analysis. During the analyze data, were also grouped by gender. All the answers given to a particular question were included in the analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

In order to determine how poverty affected participants' socialization process, they were asked questions firstly about their schoolmates' and teachers' attitudes toward themselves and their relationships with those people, secondly, about their academic performances, thirdly whether they participated in and out of school social

activities and about their expectations and future plans. Finally they were asked to describe themselves and how they evaluate their social status.

When records of interviews were evaluated, there was found no gender differences in the responses of low SES students for some questions. Therefore male and female students' responses are presented together for these questions.

**Peer/Friendship Relations:** Almost all adolescents indicated that they felt lonely at school that they stood alone or hanged out with students whose parents were also doorkeepers. They stated that students, whom they called "*rich kids*", in no way communicated with them. One of the female students said "*I am the only different person... I mean my family is in a bad financial state, I don't dare take up with anyone, anyway they do not speak with me...*" They told that their schoolmates did not invite them to any activities, did not include them to their social group and they could only be friends with students from low SES families whom they defined as "their akin". A male student said "*they look at us scornfully; I won't be friends with such people anyway...*"

**Relationships with teachers:** Almost all students declared that they did not have any problem regarding to their relations with teachers or teachers' attitudes toward them. Majority of the students told teachers behaved equally towards all students; however, four students said teachers looked at them pityingly, that they assigned important tasks to wealthy students. A female student told "*...teachers excludes us from activities, they know we are unable to cover expenses...*". And a male student replied "*...whenever someone's property is lost at school, I feel as if I am blamed even when no one tells me anything...*"

**Academic Success:** According to students' answers girls are more successful than boys. All girls except four declared that their grade point averages were high and that they actively participated in classes. Fourteen male students told their academic achievements were low and that they did not actively participate in classes nor they did not study. Both male and female students, whose academic achievements were low, told they were academically unsuccessful and they did not study for school since they had no space for study in single or double roomed basements where they were living, and they had to work in order to support their families. One male student replied "*...I have nowhere to study, it is impossible to understand what I read in a room shared by 5 people..*"

**In and out of school social activities:** There were not many differences in students answers to the question on their participation to social activities. Adolescents from both genders indicated that they participated none of the social or cultural activities. They said that they did not attend school excursions, cultural activities organized by school such as going to cinema or theatre that they did not serve in parades or ceremonies. They told they prefer not to participate since they did not own fashionable clothes nor had money; their teacher did not encourage them, and told that they were sure they would be left alone and excluded from the group by their schoolmates even if they had participated. A girl said *“...rich kids come together and have fun, we are left out of it, so I won’t participate...”*

**Future Plans and Expectations:** When students responses to questions regarding their future plans and expectations about their career and social statuses were analyzed, it was found that both boys and girls desired to hold important positions in the future. Fourteen students described “important positions” in society as “being wealthy” and “being strong”. Especially according to boys, to be strong and to be of high standing depends on earning a great deal of money. On the other hand five female students depicted that they could have first rate positions by graduating from university and holding a profession.

**Self-description:** It was seen that there were both similarities and differences in their responses regarding to the question how they described themselves when they compared themselves with high SES students. They told their dressing styles were very different from others, that they mostly had to wear old, second hand clothes that were given to them by others. They stated that “rich kids” always wore high quality, modish, branded clothing and this lead them feel themselves “miserable”. When they were asked about their houses, they replied that they were living in the basement of the apartment bock, that their flat was damp and small therefore they could never invite their schoolmates their homes who were living in luxurious housing estates. From personality characteristics perspective they told they had stronger personalities than high SES students, that they could cope with difficulties more easily and they could struggle for life alone. A male student said *“...rich kids depend on their families’ wealth on the slightest trouble, we rely on ourselves...”*. Besides there were students who stated that they had no self-confidence and did not have good social standings. Five male and three female students told they did not have self esteem, and that they continuously expected to

be humiliated by other. A girl said “ ... *I feel myself wrenched and lonely, I don't have a bit of self confidence.*”

**Social Standings:** It was found that both male and female low SES students did not consider themselves as part of the society. Almost all students depicted that they were rejected by the society; they were snubbed because of their appearances and dressings. They told they were judged by their financial states and were not accepted as part of the society. Their answers imply that they see themselves as part of a subgroup of the society consisting of low SES people rather than the whole society. A male student said “ ...*we, poor people, and they, rich ones are different from each other and they are everywhere, they hold best positions, best occupations...*” A female student told “... *I don't want to go classy or luxurious places, I don't even go to the cinema, no matter how elaborately I dress they look at me as if they know I am poor...*”

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results have shown that there are no apparent gender differences for low SES students' socialization processes. Findings have revealed that these students perceive themselves distinct from their schoolmates whom they call “rich kids”. It has been found that they think they are ostracized, rejected from peer groups and humiliated by their schoolmates. Another important finding is that they think their teachers pity them. That is why they cannot participate in school excursions, activities, parades and ceremonies.

According to the results, both feeling rejected by other students and teachers and having economical difficulties cause them refrain from participating social and cultural activities. Their thoughts on this subject also affect their future plans and lead them relate good social standing with strength and wealth.

Generally their definitions regarding to themselves and their social standings have revealed that they do not see themselves as members of a different group rather than as part of the society. They gave people's “looking at them as if they are different” as the reason for their avoidance of social and cultural activities. Moreover, they declared that they thought people “looked at them pityingly” when they went somewhere because of their appearance and clothing.

It has been found that participants do not just enter into relations nor participate social activities because of their poverty, but also majority of those students' self-esteem is underdeveloped. In addition to frequently stated expressions such as "I feel miserable" or "I feel humiliated", they told they do not have self-confidence nor a good social standing. It has been revealed that low SES students do not exercise their natural rights such as participating social and cultural activities, enlarging friendship circle, meeting with friends, entering into new circles, communicating with different people.

Participants of the study are in their adolescence and in this period they are going through emotional tumult, identity crisis, rapid physical and sexual changes, future planning and occupational decisions are all at hand. In addition to this, peer relations and being approved and admired by peers and the rest of the society are of great importance for adolescents (Messer and Millar, 1999). Accordingly, low SES adolescents' inability of socialization due to their feelings of humiliation, monetary problems and others' negative attitudes towards them will affect their social, cognitive and personality development negatively (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Findings of the study support literature. Students participating this study have also shown negative personality and cognitive development characteristics for they cannot meet their socialization needs. This can be understood by students' statements about their low self-esteem and their low academic success.

Great inequality of income distribution and deep gaps among individuals' life standards from high and low SES in Turkey affect low SES adolescents' social development negatively. Weisner (2004) suggest that problems such as poverty and unemployment prevent individuals' socialization and accordingly cause an increase in crime rates. Participants of the study apparently can not establish positive relationships with their peers and teachers, they cannot satisfy their needs of socialization because of poverty and they frequently utter the necessity of wealth in order to be strong in the society. Recently when the increase in juvenile delinquency in Turkey is considered child, it is understood that there is a demand for studies that meet low SES children and adolescents' needs for developing a social identity and socialization.

Being guarantees of our future's, adolescents' healthy development is necessary for the country's welfare. Thus, it will be beneficial to provide low SES adolescents' participation to social and cultural activities, to increase their life

standards, and to do necessary studies to prevent these youngsters feel themselves as outcasts. Besides school counseling services should support their social, cognitive and personality development and help them to form their identity by providing psychological counseling in cooperation with parents and teachers.

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