

The Impact of Poverty on Students at Graduation Level in District Okara (Pakistan).

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Abstract

Poverty, both directly and indirectly affects a student's progress and education at every level through different processes. It is a social factor that plays a pivotal role to create obstacles and hurdles in achieving educational goals. It also reduces the economic growth and productivity because it is out of control in the rural areas of the Pakistan, where people are in a state of deprivation with regards to their incomes, clothing, housing, health care and education facilities. The study analyzed the impact of poverty on students at graduation level in District Okara. This research examines the impact of poverty on students' academic outcomes at graduation level. A qualitative approach was used with focus group discussions, interviews and observations as data collection instruments for fifty (50) students and ten (10) lecturers in District Okara. The study established that students cognitive development is affected by household chores/student labor, financial constraints, lack of food, health issues long distance to and from college, and less parental guidance. This study recommends the sustainable development of both rural and urban communities. Collaborative work is also needed among inhabitants of District Okara and stakeholders in revisiting the root causes of poverty.

Index Terms: Poverty, Cognitive Development, Education, Collaborative Work.

1. Introduction

Poverty is a major contributor to the failing educational performance of students in the Pakistan. Low socioeconomic status affects physical well-being, brain development, educational performance, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Because 20% of students in the Pakistan are classified as living in poverty, the impact of these numbers creates an immense strain on educational system. Educators are now facing sky-rocketing numbers of students who are malnourished, have poor hygiene skills, and little to no parental involvement in

their student's development and education. With little to no academic modeling, the vacuum poverty creates leads to the development and suffusion of generational poverty.

The psychological effects of poverty are extraordinarily stressful and damaging to a student. Students often feel shame and humiliation being raised in poverty. Insecurities develop as they notice their worlds are different from their peers. The damage these negative feelings have on a student creates low self-esteem, diminished self-efficacy, and educational gaps (Evans, & Schamberg, 2009). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often demonstrate lower or lagging academic performance. Because of the burden of family life and the stresses of making ends meet, often time's collegeing and homework spin to the periphery of attention for those students living in poverty (Beegle, 2003). Positive nutritional habits are crucial for young developing minds and bodies. Malnutrition can be a serious detriment to cognition, memory development and language aptitude.

Research shows that the stress of low socioeconomic status can lead to adolescent psychological problems, the likes of which include anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues (Wadsworth, 2008). Moreover, students coping with poverty face deep humiliation and embarrassment when their appearance, clothing, and personal hygiene, are not the same as their peers (Beegle, 2003). A side effect of this psychological damage is extreme low self-esteem and self-efficacy. This can lead to frustration, angst and insecurity when it comes to the educational arena, which can then lead to behaviors that are misinterpreted as apathy.

2. Purpose of the Study

The current research study explored the impacts of poverty on education specifically through social perspective. Although considerable research exists on the extent of, and factors contributing to, poverty in Pakistan, “ less is known about how lecturers at graduate level perceive the impact of poverty on students, how they respond to poverty in their college, and what lecturers view as necessary to overcome educational barriers related to poverty” (White, Hill, Kemp, MacRae, & Young, 2012, p.2). The current study considered in District Okara, with a high percentage of families living in generational poverty. The study focused on impact of poverty at graduation level and educational barriers related to poverty.

3. Research Questions

1. What is the impact of poverty on education at graduation level?
2. What are the educational barriers related to poverty?
3. Which initiatives do lecturers believe are helpful at mitigating educational barriers related to poverty?

4. Background and Review of Related Literature

In order to provide a context for the current study this chapter will examine the research and literature investigating the nature of poverty and education issues. There are a number of questions to be considered with respect to this complex issue: What is the impact of poverty on students? What challenges do lecturers encounter to support students in overcoming educational barriers relating to poverty? What is needed to support students in poverty so they can participate and succeed in college? An examination of current research can lead to a better understanding of the problem and help to identify possible solutions to help students and families mitigate educational barriers related to poverty. Because the culture of poverty is complex, the issue of barriers to education cannot be considered in isolation. What is needed first of all is a closer examination of the research on poverty.

Research analyst Margaret White's (2009) poverty and education report discusses why it is important for educators to have some understanding of the structural causes of poverty, and why they must challenge beliefs and assumptions about poverty that stigmatize low income students and their families. In order to build empathy and understanding, it is crucial to prevent students living in poverty from perceiving that they are to blame for their own economic circumstances. "How we think, feel, and communicate about poverty makes a difference in how students feel about themselves and their college community" (White, 2009, p.9). White draws on educational research to explore the issues around the framing of poverty and students. Her report also examines how economic, political and social changes over the past decade have contributed to student and family poverty.

Many students face significant barriers as a result of living with the effects of poverty. A Toronto research study found that students living in shelters lacked a sense of belonging to their college and were not likely to participate in before and after college activities (Decter, 2007). Decter (2007) found that the students were reluctant to disclose their living situation, due to fear of being stigmatized or bullied, which was in turn a barrier to receiving subsidies to assist with the cost of extra-curricular programs. These students were homeless but because they were afraid to say so they missed out on funding which would have given them increased access to programs. Barriers to education can include access to adequate health care, lack of adequate food and clothing, lack of funds to participate in field trips and before and after college recreational opportunities, lack of home access to technology, and lack of mentorship (White, 2009).

According to Flessa (2007), who conducted an extensive review of poverty and education literature, there is considerable evidence that education can buffer families against poverty, and that education can help move families out of poverty in the longer term. Successful high college graduation almost doubles the employment rate for both Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals.

Richards (2008), a social policy advocate, conducted a study to examine the educational gap between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. His concern was that graduation rates are much lower for Aboriginal students, especially for those who live on-reserve (Richards, 2008).

There is no question that there are many risk factors associated with poverty. Colleges must confront the evidence that children living in poverty face significant educational barriers. It is important to identify these educational barriers, but also to identify and explore college initiatives that can mitigate the effects of these barriers.

The gap in the research explored in the current study is concerned with what is working with respect to mitigating poverty related educational barriers. The focus of the current research is to explore the impact of poverty at graduation level. Data collection provided evidence of the challenges lecturers face and the strategies they are currently using to address educational processes related to poverty. It was this researcher's hope that the data would not only identify needs but would also identify significant strengths. Findings from the data were used to provide recommendations for future action.

5. Methodology

The researchers explored the participants' experiences regarding the impact of poverty on students at graduation level. Primary data was collected and analyzed using an interpretive paradigm. Therefore, a qualitative research design was considered appropriate. One of the advantages is that qualitative research allows the researcher to gain understanding of the academic performance students at graduation level from poverty stricken backgrounds from the participants' perspectives in their natural settings.

6. Research Design

According to Smith (2007), a research design refers to the plan and structure of the investigation used to obtain evidence to answer research questions. Good research is therefore, not accidental. The qualitative phenomenological design was adopted for use in this study. It is effective for revealing deep issues and making voices heard (Maxwell 2006) and was thus found suitable to explore the effects of poverty on academic performance of students at graduation level in District Okara.

7. Sampling

The aim of sampling in social research is to produce representative selections of population elements. The study was carried out in five colleges in Okara district, Pakistan, two rural, two urban and one from a town. The target population comprised for fifty (50) students and ten (10)

lecturers. The target population is therefore, 60. A sample of five (5) students, five (5) from each college and two (2) lecturers (one female and one male) from each college, was purposively drawn.

8. Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to an intensive review of related literature, data was collected through interviews, focus group discussions and observations with/ of the participants comprising fifty (50) students and ten (10) lecturers. An interview schedule was designed and used to obtain data. Furthermore there were five students' focus groups (from one college) and two lecturers' focus groups (from one college). During the focus group interviews, the researchers created a social environment in which group members were stimulated by one another's perception and ideas. This technique was believed to increase the quality and richness of data, rather than merely one-on-one interviewing.

The interviews with the five students' focus groups (from one college) and two lecturers' focus groups (from one college) were audio-taped. The researchers made observations and copious notes during the interviews and focus group discussions. The interview schedule had pre-formulated questions which were consistently used to ensure that the same basic line of enquiry was pursued with each focus-group interviewed. The wording of questions in the schedule was simple and not abstract. This was to enhance the subsequent recording of responses. An inductive approach to analyzing the responses was undertaken to allow patterns, themes, and categories to emerge rather than being imposed prior to data collection and analysis. Similar responses were grouped together into categories.

9. Findings

The study also showed that students have to walk long distances for them to attend college. In the study 8 (16%) students confirmed that they cover a distance of between 1-3 kilometers to college. 15 (30%) had to walk between 4-6 kilometers, 9 (18%) walk for 7-9 kilometers while the longest distances among the respondents was over 10 kilometers which was confirmed by 18 (36%) of them. Considering the distances covered by these students this can only reveal the fatigue they have to endure and the extent to which this affects alertness at college. Furthermore, these students hardly get enough meals in between times.

This study revealed that 12 (24%) only had one meal per. day. 28 (56%) had two meals per day and 10 (20%) had three meals per day. Of concern are the 24% who have one meal a day and the 56% who manage to get two meals a day making a total of 80% of students who do not take the recommended three meals a day. This may directly affect these students' health and college performance.

10. Conclusions

The study found out that although there are numerous causes of poverty in the District Okara, unemployment and lack of education emerged as the prime ones. Poverty presents a number of negative effects on academic achievement. It was noted that most poverty stricken eat two meals a day, walk long distances to college and arrive late for lessons. Poverty stricken students revealed that they had been suspended from attending lessons for failure to pay fees on time thereby losing valuable learning time. College drop-outs revealed that their main reason for not finishing their studies was financial shortages. College records on student's performance revealed that poverty stricken students performed lower than their poor counterparts.

Although the majority of students were beneficiaries of the government's Basic Education Assistance Module, they expressed facing shortages of stationery, college levies and other basic necessities. This would suggest that the financial aid given by government to poverty stricken students does not meet all the educational requirements needed by students.

11. Recommendations

In light of the aforementioned conclusions, it is recommended that college administrators should find other more positive ways of encouraging poverty stricken students to pay college fees. For example, college heads can stagger the payments of fees in order to allow poverty stricken students to pay in small and affordable amounts throughout the year.

While parents' low level of education may be the cause of their unemployment and low incomes, it is recommended government and donor organizations embark on poverty alleviation programs that will make poverty stricken parent earn a living. Donor community is urged to consider funding education for orphans and those students who belong to impoverished families in order to reduce poverty.

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