

Poverty in Schools: Challenges and Recommendations

Uğur Şeker

Ministry of Education, Turkey

Abstract

Poverty is one of the most significant disadvantages individuals may face, as life presents different opportunities to each person. Regardless of their performance, certain assigned characteristics may hinder individuals from fully utilizing their potential. Poverty spans a broad spectrum, ranging from extreme deprivation, where individuals lack access to essential survival needs, to relatively less severe forms. In educational settings, poverty can pose various challenges for students, limiting both the number of opportunities available to them and their likelihood of benefiting from these opportunities. Moreover, impoverished individuals may experience difficulties in demonstrating their abilities, suffer from low self-esteem, feel a sense of delay in life, lack access to artistic activities, and face social exclusion. They may also be at a higher risk of engaging in criminal activities, struggle with institutional trust, and be subjected to stereotypical judgments, often being labeled as lazy or irresponsible. Additionally, these kinds of discriminative behaviors can contribute to psychological distress, leading to stress, anxiety, and depression. To support disadvantaged individuals in realizing their potential within educational environments, several measures should be implemented. Collaborations should be established with organizations that assist in meeting basic needs, and free mental health services should be made available to impoverished individuals. Furthermore, efforts should be made to inform them about available support resources, and school campuses should be designed to include inclusive activities that all students can enjoy. Mental health professionals working within educational institutions have an ethical responsibility to adapt their professional competencies to effectively support individuals with lower levels of education and socioeconomic status.

Keywords: Poverty, school, education

1. Introduction

Poverty encompasses a broad spectrum, ranging from a state in which individuals are unable to meet their most basic survival needs to a condition where, despite being able to satisfy these needs, they fall behind others in their community in terms of overall well-being [4]. The challenges faced by impoverished individuals and families include living in neglected and inadequate housing, limited access to professional services, poor physical and mental health, inability to receive necessary treatment, unemployment, and having to reside in areas with high crime rates [3]. At its core, poverty can be defined as the difficulty individuals face in accessing the resources necessary for a functional life. Jensen [5] defines poverty as a chronic and restrictive risk factor that negatively affects both physical and mental well-being and identifies six distinct types of poverty. These are: situational poverty, which arises after a sudden crisis and lasts for a specific period; generational poverty, which is transmitted across at least two generations; absolute poverty, which denotes a lack of the most basic resources (food, water, shelter); relative poverty, which refers to falling behind the economic standards of the surrounding community; urban poverty, characterized by noise, violence, and challenging living conditions in densely populated cities; and rural poverty, which involves difficulties in accessing essential services in remote areas. Although the hardships experienced by individuals may vary depending on the type of poverty, it is evident that poverty is a universal problem, with poor individuals around the world facing similar challenges.

One of the most significant characteristics of poverty is the difficulty of overcoming it. Poverty is often an inherited disadvantage that is involuntarily passed down from one generation to the next. Consequently, the knowledge and skills that an individual can acquire through financial means are inevitably influenced by the family's economic foundation [9]. In most cases, impoverished individuals are born into and raised in poverty. This reality negatively affects both the number of opportunities



they encounter throughout their lives and their chances of benefiting from them [2]. Among the many challenges faced by the poor, education stands out as one of the most pressing. Compared to their more affluent peers, impoverished individuals tend to experience lower-quality educational processes. Yet, education—along with personal knowledge and skills it fosters—remains the most fundamental path toward escaping the effects of poverty. From this perspective, poor-quality education and poverty form a vicious cycle that mutually reinforces one another [10].

To prevent the challenges experienced by students from impoverished families in schools, it is crucial to raise awareness about these issues. This review study aims to address the problems encountered by students from low-income families in educational settings and to explore potential solutions to these challenges.

2. Challenges Faced by Impoverished Students in Schools

When compared to their more affluent peers, students from impoverished backgrounds encounter a multitude of challenges within the school environment. These poverty-related problems arise beyond the control of the students themselves and often diminish the effectiveness of their educational experience. Among the most pressing of these challenges is the inability to allocate financial resources for school-related materials or to participate in supplementary educational activities that wealthier peers can afford [3]. This poses a significant barrier to skill development for disadvantaged students. Items such as stationery, clothing, and shoes required for school are often financially burdensome for these students and their families. Similarly, participation in extracurricular activities like field trips—which are designed to support academic skills—is also difficult for them.

Another common difficulty faced by poor students is the lack of leisure time compared to their affluent counterparts. Impoverished university students, for instance, often feel compelled to work during holidays to cover their educational expenses. The income they earn is frequently used not only to support their own school-related needs but also to contribute financially to their families [6]. Regardless of educational level, the lack of time to rest or engage in enriching activities negatively affects their academic development.

A study [8] revealed that even when impoverished students possess high levels of social capital, they are often reluctant to participate in activities that would allow them to represent their schools. This may be attributed to their comparatively lower levels of self-efficacy [3]. When it comes to academic achievement, poor students may set lower standards for themselves than their wealthier counterparts, which, in turn, contributes to diminished academic performance and self-efficacy. Additionally, factors such as absenteeism, low literacy and education levels among parents, undiagnosed mental health issues, and poor living conditions can also hinder academic success [10].

Discrimination and social exclusion represent another set of challenges faced by impoverished students. Although public education is officially free, schools may solicit financial donations from families to meet certain institutional needs. In such cases, students and families unable to contribute financially may feel marginalized. Poverty is not a disadvantage that can be easily hidden; poor families often struggle to afford transportation, lunch, or new clothing for their children. These families tend to have less time to spend with their children due to demanding work schedules, limited participation in cultural and artistic activities, and a lack of the knowledge and skills needed to support their children's academic tasks. Such limitations may lead parents to feel inadequate in their parenting roles. In short, poverty serves as a significant stressor that threatens the mental health of both children and their families [4].

Another critical concern is the mental well-being of impoverished students. A major factor that contributes to deteriorating mental health in these individuals is the tendency to constantly compare themselves to others based on financial means. Students who compare themselves to their wealthier counterparts may feel ashamed of their own circumstances and find it difficult to form social relationships [12]. Furthermore, impoverished individuals are more likely to live in noisy, high-crime areas [13], which triggers chronic stress and poses a threat to mental health.

In summary, the difficulties experienced by impoverished students include the inability to afford school necessities, poor nutrition, inadequate clothing, low academic expectations, experiences of discrimination and exclusion, threats to mental health, difficulty in forming social relationships, vulnerability to abuse, and an increased likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior. Therefore, it is of critical importance that schools implement preventive measures aimed at addressing the challenges that poor students are likely to face.

3. Recommendations for Schools Regarding Impoverished Students

Communities expect schools to equip all students with the skills necessary to lead a quality life, regardless of their financial circumstances. Therefore, allocating financial resources to ensure that all students benefit equally from educational opportunities should be a top priority [4]. In this regard, school administrators and teachers bear significant responsibility in preventing the marginalization of poor students [9].

Despite facing financial constraints, qualified teachers can create inclusive and accepting environments in their classrooms. To help poor students acquire academic knowledge and skills, it is essential to enhance their sense of self-efficacy through targeted interventions [3]. Consequently, identifying students' talents and supporting those talents becomes crucial. Conducting talent screenings, particularly at the beginning of the school year, may serve as an effective strategy in this regard.

A study by King [7] found that successful students from impoverished backgrounds tend to share certain personality traits such as persistence, curiosity, and determination. Therefore, fostering an encouraging and intellectually stimulating atmospheres for all students within the school environment is of paramount importance. In this context, the attitudes of teachers and school counselors toward impoverished students play a critical role. Stakeholders in schools should receive training that raises awareness of the cognitive, emotional, and psychological effects of poverty, as well as the specific challenges faced by poor students. Furthermore, the implementation of psycho-educational programs targeting students may help reduce the likelihood of bullying, discrimination, and exclusion [4].

To strengthen the sense of belonging of impoverished families and their children to the school, it is essential to enhance school-family collaboration [1]. Opportunities should be created for poor families to contribute to the school community, which in turn can reinforce both the students' and families' connections to the school. This sense of connection is believed to facilitate the development of stronger self-efficacy beliefs related to education among both students and their parents.

Lastly, it is recommended that teachers and school counselors provide one-on-one support to promote the academic development of poor students [11]. Since the factors that motivate disadvantaged students to remain in school and develop their skills can vary significantly depending on their individual experiences, regular one-on-one meetings may be particularly effective for supporting their progress. School counselors have an ethical responsibility to understand the cultural backgrounds of impoverished students and to adapt their professional practices accordingly. Given that individuals from impoverished backgrounds are more likely to suffer from mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, it is crucial for school counselors to develop their skills in culturally competent counseling practices.

4. Conclusion

Poverty, as a disadvantage that can affect all aspects of life, negatively impacts individuals physically, cognitively, and psychologically. Among the environments where the effects of poverty and social class disparities are most strongly felt, schools stand out as particularly critical for students. Challenging circumstances that arise independently of students' control and are disconnected from their educational context can hinder their ability to focus on school and academic tasks. For this reason, it is crucial for schools to become inclusive environments that neutralize the effects of social class differences. Achieving this requires the active involvement and responsibility of all stakeholders within the school system.

Eliminating the inequalities in opportunity and class-based discrimination caused by socioeconomic disparities demands comprehensive and large-scale reforms. Realizing these changes depends on the development of a society-wide consciousness that opposes classism. While it is evident that such transformation is a long-term process, it is imperative that students who miss out on various opportunities due to poverty are not overlooked in the meantime. Regardless of their financial circumstances, schools must become inclusive institutions that equip all students with the social, cognitive, and psychological skills necessary to sustain their lives.

REFERENCES



- [1] Atmaca, T., & Sağlam, D. (2023). Yoksulluk kültürünün öğrencilerin eğitim yaşantılarına ve gelişim alanlarına yansımalarının incelenmesi (Annelerin deneyimleri). *İstanbul Ticaret Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 22(47), 764-788. <https://doi.org/10.46928/iticusbe.1136832>
- [2] Boardman, J. (2011). Social exclusion and mental health—how people with mental health problems are disadvantaged: an overview. *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, 15(3), 112-121. DOI 10.1108/20428301111165690
- [3] Buck, R., & Deutsch, J. (2014). Effects of poverty on education. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 11(2), 1139-1148. doi: 10.14687/ijhs.v11i2.3043
- [4] Hoşgörür, T., Evren, M. K., Kahya, O., Sezer, S., Kizir, M., Korkut, P., Yıldırım, K., Hoşgörür, V., & Yeşil, E. (2024). Kent yoksulu ebeveynlerin bakış açısından yoksulluk ve eğitim ilişkisi. *Cumhuriyet Uluslararası Eğitim Dergisi*, 13(2), 353-368. <https://doi.org/10.30703/cije.1293059>
- [5] Jensen, E. (2009). Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it. ASCD. https://books.google.com.tr/books?hl=tr&lr=&id=FISDxE1z7yMC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=what+can+we+do+about+impoverished+students&ots=CcJjRc4Hfu&sig=tlGprSB6ZLPAM9wKzLQGHppht3s&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=what%20can%20we%20do%20about%20impoverished%20students&f=false
- [6] Kahraman, F., & Kahraman, A. B. (2016). Mevsimlik istihdamın eğitilmiş gençleri: inşaatlarda çalışan üniversite öğrencileri üzerine bir araştırma. *Süleyman Demirel Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, (38), 183-201. <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/sufesosbil/issue/23719/252643>
- [7] King, A. L. (2014). Success against all odds: Lessons learned from successful, impoverished students (Undergraduate honors thesis, Liberty University). Liberty University Digital Commons. <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/honors/468/>
- [8] Martono, N., Puspitasari, E., & Lisnawati, L. (2023). Social capital of impoverished students: a study on the strength of social networks, trust, and norms among impoverished students. *Society*, 11(1), 64-81. DOI: 10.33019/society.v11i1.418
- [9] Mulford, B., Kendall, D., Ewington, J., Edmunds, B., Kendall, L., & Silins, H. (2008). Successful principalship of high-performance schools in high-poverty communities. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 46(4), 461-480. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230810882009>
- [10] Singh, I. (2019). Victims of circumstance: Impoverished communities, education, and the process of slowly overcoming. *Wardlaw+Hartridge Capstone Research Journal*, 1(1), 49-70.
- [11] Çilek, A., Duzguncinar, T., & Varlık, S. (2025). Poverty and academic achievement in the light of teachers' experiences and perceptions: A Phenomenological study. *Kastamonu Education Journal*, 33(1), 168-179. <https://doi.org/10.24106/kefdergi.1628447>
- [12] Burns, J. K. (2015). Poverty, inequality and a political economy of mental health. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, 24(2), 107-113. doi:10.1017/S2045796015000086
- [13] Evans, G. W., & De France, K. (2022). Childhood poverty and psychological well-being: The mediating role of cumulative risk exposure. *Development and Psychopathology*, 34(3), 911-921. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579420001947>