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Analysis of the Relationship between Academic Failure & Social Inequality According to the Views of School Principals*

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Abstract

This study manages the relationship between academic failure and social inequality. The qualitative research method has been adopted in this study. According to the results of the study, we can mention a relationship between academic failure and social inequality. Also, students from lower socio-economic levels have lower academic achievement than students from upper socio-economic levels. Political authorities don't provide solutions to reduce academic failure, and school principals are expected to resolve this predicament as if it is a consequence of individual failure. As academic failure results from social inequality, it is only possible to eliminate academic failure by socially egalitarian policies.

Keywords: *Academic Failure, Cultural Capital, Social Inequality.*

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Introduction

Education plays a significant role in the socialization process of the individual and mediates the reproduction of culture and social structure. In this context, education and school take their position among the primary social institutions in which inequalities are reproduced in capitalist societies.

The relationship between educational inequality and social factors has been the subject of research in the 1950s and 1960s in countries such as the USA, England, and France. In these studies, it was concluded that social inequalities were reproduced through education. Bourdieu and Passeron, Bernstein emphasized that the differences and similarities arising from the social class were transferred to schools in the same way. Baudelot and Establet, Bowles and Gintis emphasized the relationship between the status of labor and cultural transmission (van Zanten, 2005, 155).

Bourdieu (1986, 243) conceptualizes cultural capital in three forms as ‘embodied’, ‘objectified’, and ‘institutionalized’ cultural capital. The ‘embodied’ cultural capital includes preferences and behaviors, the ‘objectified’ cultural capital includes the transfer of cultural elements (such as painting, music, reading); but to internalize this transfer, it must be transformed into a physical form, and that is being reflected in behaviors. In ‘institutionalized’ cultural capital, it includes institutionalization of the physical form, i.e. documents gained through education (such as diplomas, certificates). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is related to the sum of the skills and abilities conveyed from the privileged groups in society. Cultural capital (such as education, language), social capital (social ties and communication), and economic capital (having money and other material resources) can be obtained through both family transfer and formal education. The ruling classes in the society maintain their power by using the mobility and learning methods of capital (Yosso, 2005, 76). Thus, cultural capital through education serves to reproduce social inequalities.

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Education takes not only place in the schools but also includes the transfer of certain characteristics from the family. The educational background can be expanded and reproduced through the school as an institutional structure. Individuals who are members of the ruling class come to the school with several social and cultural cues they have gained from the family, which is having them, while the children of the working class come to the school to gain these skills. In this respect, the school is not a neutral institution; it reflects the experiences of the dominant classes in particular. Although individuals in the working class have gained social and cultural skills of the middle-and upper classes at school, and though it is often thought that they cannot develop a natural familiarity with the innate skills of others (Lamont and Lareau, 1988, cited in: Arun, 2009), the discriminatory practices observed in schools suggest that different skills are gained for different social class.

Cultural capital expresses the contribution of family background and education to the educational success and social status of individuals or groups. For example, those who have the right to higher education gain more acceptances in society because of their cultural privileges (Angerama, 2008, 4). On the one hand, cultural capital affects educational success, and it also mediates the reproduction of educational inequalities. In this process, schools play a key role in transferring cultural capital (Schwalbe et al., 2000, 431). In the studies examining together the effects of school characteristics and family status on achievement, it has shown school characteristics (such as school equipment, technology) to have less impact than family status on school achievement (Parcel and Dufur, 2001, 882). Similarly, Gordon (1996) found that the school's environment and socio-economic factors play a little role in educational achievement (As Cited in: Warrington, 2005, 798). Şirin (2005), in his research that he analyzed the data containing the total of 101,157 students, 6,871 schools and 128 school districts in the articles published in academic journals between 1990 and 2000 through a meta-analysis; found that the socio-economic level was 'medium' effective in academic achievement. Again in a study that Jaeger stated that the distribution of income in Denmark is similar (2009), it was also revealed that the cultural capital that the students brought from the family rather than the economic income was the determinant of the school choices of the students.

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That the socio-economic level of the family cannot explain the academic achievement alone reveals the importance of cultural capital in academic achievement. However, that children from families with low socio-economic status experience socialization and behavior problems is another important fact (Parcel and Dufur, 2001, 884).

The low family status brings the concept of social exclusion. Social exclusion can be defined as both financial deprivation and being unable to take part in social, political activities as required by daily life (Warrington, 2005, 797). As a matter of fact, research on the relationship between social exclusion and education explain the reason for leaving school with low school achievement because of inability of families to benefit from education and similar public services (Warrington, 2005, 798). The research also shows that children from areas with social deprivation have lower educational achievements (Higgs, 1997, As Cited in: Warrington, 2005, 798).

When we approach the subject from Turkey scale, the results are similar. For example, in the study conducted by data set of 4942 students (family income, education level of parents, employment of parents, use of the computer at home) who participated in the 2006 PISA tests (Student Achievement Assessment Program) of Dinçer and Kolaşın (2009, 3-16), it was concluded that the socio-economic origin of the student and the enrolled program type were the most important factor in success and that the effect of the school's resources on the success was marginal. Similarly, Coşkun and Ünal (2003), in their study conducted with 970 high school students to determine the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement, found that students with high academic achievement were children from families with high socio-economic status.

As Furomoto and Montano point out, schools as the micro-organism of the society reflect the connection between power and authority. The institutional pressure in schools (education), a control-based and stress-emphasized curriculum, educational policies that marginalize ethnic cultures can be clearly seen in the differences between the educational opportunities provided to the poor and wealthy family children (Act: Serdan, 2009,400). In capitalist society, schools are in the

position of subject in the process of creation and re-creation of an effective dominant culture. Schools, however, undertake the function of teaching the norms, values, trends and culture that contribute to the ideological hegemony of the dominant groups (Apple, 2006, 85). Therefore, schools are seen as a place / institution in which the unequal structure of power relations operates. However, education helps us to envision a world rejecting malice and humiliation for those deemed as the other in a social order where the value of the person is measured mostly by privileged categories such as the breed, race, citizenship and language (Giroux, 2008, 80). School is the practice that will make this world concrete. As a public institution, the school is also a field of democratic struggle. Cause schools have the potential to be a democratic public space that instills the skills, knowledge, and values necessary for students to be critical citizens who can account for power (Giroux, 2008, 60).

In a society where inequality prevails, is it possible to make the school a democratic structure? Although the answer to such a question is difficult, it is critical for school principals and teachers to address inequality, not to be a tool for inequality practices, and to stand against any kind of inequality or antidemocratic system. This is also 'pedagogical practice' as Adorno says. While pedagogical practice means resisting the social deformations that shape everyday needs and desires, it also means making visible the social practices and mechanisms that represent the opposite of the critical learning, autonomous thinking, and self-transcendence (Giroux, 2008, 61). In this context, the main roles of school principals and teachers are to reveal the power mechanism.

That school principals and teachers see the school as a field of democratic struggle and have a conscious attitude on this subject will provide students with the skills to practice a democratic life, i.e. to look critically at the society and to interfere in society. Especially the democratic attitudes and behaviors that school principals will adopt have a key value to form a democratic school environment. The democratic behaviors and attitudes of school principals can create a more unbiased and more humane school climate and also may reduce the violence students experience over against academic failure or other discrimination.

Method

This study aims to examine the relationship between academic failure and social inequality within the framework of the opinions of the primary school principals. As the relationship between academic failure and social inequality was investigated according to the opinions of the school principals, the qualitative research approach is used in the study. In this context, the principals working in primary schools in the city center of Ankara compose of the study group. Three schools were chosen from three central districts under the ‘purposive sampling technique’. In the selection of schools, representing the different socio-economic level was taken as the main criterion. In this context, the socio-economic level classification prepared by the Ankara Provincial Directorate of National Education based on the 2000 census results was used.

The data were collected by semi-structured interview form to be appropriate for the research purpose. For this purpose, the researcher prepared an interview form. Two basic questions were asked to the school principals during the meeting with the school principals about “Whether there is a relationship between the social class and academic achievement that the students come from” and ”As a principal, what kind of path they follow to reduce the negativity the students with low academic achievement from a low socioeconomic level experience”.

The interview form includes personal information (such as gender, seniority, branch) to get to know the school principals. The data recorded by the researcher were first converted to text and analyzed by content analysis. While analyzing, it was tried to establish a relationship with the concepts that could explain the data collected.

When analyzing the data, the interviewed school principals were coded with the interview number (P1), and to differentiate the schools in different socio-economic levels (SEL), lower (L), middle (M) and upper (U) sounds are used as symbols. For example, the Principle (P), Code (1) and the socio-economic level (L, M, and U) were noted, and the interviewer’s words have been coded in the (P1-U) format.

Findings

What Kind Of Relationship Is There Between Social Inequality & Academic Achievement?

The reflection of social inequality in the school takes place in the form of reducing the students to successful / unsuccessful, talented / untalented or learner / non-learner distinction. This distinction is essentially the basis for the legitimacy of meritocratic principles in school. In the meritocracy, the student holds characteristics of a subject within their talent or their eagerness to learn, and the student's success is related not only to the student but also to the pragmatic reasons that enable the socio-economic structure to continue. In this process, students from a low socio-economic level (as claimed to be less skilled) will have lower academic achievement than students from an upper socio-economic level.

Although new contents/definitions have been introduced to academic failure everyday economic, social, cultural and political changes, it is often among the first factors that come to mind that the income level of the family is determinant on academic achievement. The school interviewed principals draw attention to the same point with the answers to the question 'Is there a relationship between the socio-economic level of the family and the success of the student?' Indeed, school principal (P1-U) answers the related question in the following words,

There is. This topic should be a research subject. From first grade to eighth grade, I know what the students here will do. The child of the family whose income level is high is successful. Each school district has it. 90 percent of janitor's children fail, and the remaining 10 percent are exceptions. I observe this. This should be seriously investigated. What causes these children to fail? Why is this happening? Both grow in the same environment. What is the reason? Nutrition? These should be investigated and examined (P1-U).

As seen, he explains the high level of academic achievement with family income.

Another school principal said these words,

Sure, there is. If the income level of the family is high, he / she sends his / her child to the training centers, and he / she can afford a private lesson for the child. The interest and support of the family is effective in the child's success. You also have seen it, it is clear from which class they come from our students' appearance and clothes. It is impossible for the parent who cannot buy clothes to invest in education for the child, and to support the child (P3-L).

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He describes the role of income in high academic achievement by linking the high level of income of the family to other supports (such as the training center, private lesson) which will increase the academic achievement of the child. Similarly, another school principal says,

The child, whose family has a good income level, gets what he wants, and the cost of education is covered as he wants. A child whose family's income is not high is also successful, but the future is not so bright. The child cannot take the next step when he/she comes to higher education. He/she cannot move forward because education is based on money. When he/she can't find the money, there is no progress for them (P2-L).

He shares similar ideas. However, some of the school principals answered the same question as follows,

I don't think it's a direct relationship. I think it's genetic. There are instances that have made us hesitate. The family is illiterate, their financial situation is poor, but the child becomes very successful. Family income is important, but not decisive (P6-M).

I don't think there's a relationship. Students of families who are in poor condition can also be very successful. I do not believe that there is a relationship between income and success (P8-U).

I don't think there is because I have four janitor children in a classroom at my school. He has no home, and he doesn't have a thousand-dollar income, and he makes his living in the janitor's apartment, but his kids are just great kids. On the other hand, there are children who have a better financial situation and have failed. Income is not decisive (P4-U).

As seen, they do not accept the effect of income on success. Carneiro and Heckman (2002, 989-1018), children's education to determine whether the factors that determine whether the income or family characteristics of the study, based on the question of the family, have reached the conclusion that the sociocultural characteristics of the family is more important than income. It is clear that this result corresponds with the concept of cultural capital that Bourdieu proposes. This finding obtained in the research is important both for the similarity of Carneiro and Heckman's work and for supporting the argument that success is associated with the concept of cultural capital.

School principals express Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as either family consciousness by saying 'the children of conscious families have high academic achievements, and the academic achievement of the children of the unconscious family is low (P8-U)', or associate it with the educational level of the

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family 'The education level of the family is very important. This is reflected in the child when the family is educated. This affects both academic and social life (P4-U)', and support the discourse that family characteristics in the literature influence the child's success with the form of views like 'Income does not directly contribute to success, but family consciousness has a direct contribution (P6-M)'.

School principals explain the impact of sociocultural characteristics on the success of the child by referring to the cultural factors. A school principal said,

I think there is a relationship between the cultural education of the family and the success of the child. When you look at the problem child, you see the problem of the family. One-to-one interest, the lack of a problem in the child's life affects the child's success. If the culture and education level of the family is high, the children of these families become more successful (P7-L).

First, there's a problem in the perception. What we call perception is the product of our experiences. There is a difference in the perception of a child whose life is thorough and, how to say, goes to the theater, the cinema, take the bus. It's hard to narrate something to a child who didn't see, travel, or eat. Therefore, there is a relationship between culture and success (P9-M).

Again, principals rephrase Bourdieu's emphasis on the fact that 'children from the ruling class have the keys to decrypt the messages transmitted in the classroom, and that knowledge and skills influence success' as follows;

There is a relationship between success and family income: the family with a high income can transfer their income to education, offer a wide variety of tools, send them to the training centers, and afford private lessons. They support their child with social activities outside of school. The parent himself needs the social activities and educates his child while he is training himself (P9-M).

Marx, Creswell, and Ainley (2006) also reported this fact by principal by saying 'It was demonstrated by the research carried out in Austria, Germany and the Netherlands that the participation of the family in cultural activities increased the educational achievement of children'. A school principal (P4-U) draws attention to the same point.

In other words, if the income level of the family is high, has the family experienced a little more, or I don't know if they knows things a little bit better, but if the family's income is high, they can provide more material for their child. They can send their child to the cinema or to different activities. They are all parallel to the economy. This is helping to child to be more open minded. So there can be differences.

That the child is open minded meaning 'the amount of cultural capital' is called as stimulus by the principals, and they suggest that this increases the school success.

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For example, the expressions such as “*The family with a high income level can offer strong stimuli to their children. The brain is developing of being social in this way. This is undeniable. This is an important fact of education. Education is provided by strong stimulants (P7-L)*” or “*The high level of income makes it possible for many stimulators to be presented together. These affect school success (P5-M)*” emphasize the mentioned stimulants as the material and cultural possibilities families can offer.

On the other hand, a school director relates student achievement to social inequality and precisely expresses the function of reproduction of social inequality in education:

The family is inseparable from society. What is the economic infrastructure of societies is education as what we call the superstructure. Economics determines education. When we go from general to specific, we go from society to family. How does the economic level of the family affect? If the family avoids taking a book, a ruler to his child, what can they do when they don't have the money? Of course they'll avoid. This affects education. There are children going to dramas, theater, cinema, and resting, and then sit down and studies. Doesn't this affect education? (P7-L).

An interviewed school principal (P9-M) discusses social inequality in the context of inequality of opportunity with the words, “*The family, who has a high income level, can pay any kind of money for their child. My child, at the age of 3, began this race with which kindergarten training is better research. The child here begins their school life at 7. That child is not equal to the starting point of the race with my child. My child is behind the family's child who has better income than me. The starting points for the race are never equal. This unequal race is effective in the child's academic achievement*”. Since equal treatment by giving equal rights to students from unequal conditions or by including them in the same education system means confirming initial inequalities (Butler, 1997, cited in Latchem, 2006, 50), firstly, the initial inequalities must be eliminated. A school director (Y6-O) expresses the reflection of initial inequalities on the school environment in a very concrete way:

The development of a child is followed by feeding from the womb. The underprivileged child doesn't have this chance. When it comes to the school environment, let's leave school success aside for a minute, the other children don't want to include the poor child to their games. There is even economic grouping among children.

In summary, school principals explain academic failure jointly with social inequalities and point out the cultural level and income levels of the family as the most critical factor determining academic achievement. Based on this, it can be said that school principals are aware of social inequalities directly reflecting on school environment. This awareness doesn't change according to the socioeconomic level of the school area where they carry out their duties.

What Is Being Done to Reduce Academic Failure in Schools?

Policies to reduce educational inequality do not resolve the success inequality. Although there are studies in developed countries suggesting that the close socioeconomic level has a positive effect on the educational success, these claims do not seem to be significant today (Marks, Creswell and Ainley 2006; 105). Therefore, the measures taken by the school principals to reduce the failure in the school environment don't really mean much. School principals suggested the question of *'As a principal, what kind of path do you follow to reduce the disadvantages of students with low academic achievement from lower socioeconomic level'* to support the above emphasis. A school principal (P3-L) stated,

We can't do much. If the financial situation is good, it is easier for the child to reach technology and different resources. In state school, you're locking up technology classes. Reason, there is no staff. If it breaks, there's no money to fix it. The child contributes to school success if he / she can also get technology at home. Money comes in at this point. At this point, the state can isolate this relationship. The financial situation of the family does not have to be good for the education of the people.

On the one hand, he states that the solution can be produced at the state level; on the other hand, he brings up the most important problem of schools (not finding financial resources) by saying that due to lack of resources, they cannot use technology in school even in teaching. With the problem of the lack of resources in schools, a school principal referred to the changing tasks of school principals saying *'we now became Robin Hood'* and continues:

We've already stopped our work. We're looking at what we can get from people. We take measures for poor students as school management. We're helping them with clothes to wear or food. How we do it, we get it from the rich and give it to the poor. That's why I said we became Robin Hood. First, we want to meet the basic needs of the poor classes coming after. As for the school success, we are opening courses under the name of a schooling course in the school, and we are making such an effort for the

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poor students to be successful by separating a quota of two to each class. Is it enough?
No. We're fooling ourselves. In short, we do nothing (P1-U).

Similarly, two school principals state that before the success / failure problem, the poverty of the people should be eliminated.

It is the state that will wipe out differences and inequalities. The children are coming to school on an empty stomach. Which social class children come from is clear from their faces. First, we will get their stomachs full, and then we will expect for success in class (P3-L)

Even though you give their books, what about other everything? You should already give their book. This is their right. What will you do with their other needs? You will put them on our backs too. You will give them their needs first. Then you will ask for success from classes. You declare to public saying so many students scored zero points for that test blaming the school, blaming the teacher instead of congratulating us. We're trying to make this work as devoted as we can. We cannot do anything to support the student's success. Our situation is blindingly obvious, you see that the school is falling apart (P7-L).

Primary school principals stated that academic failure could be prevented by socio-economic policies to be implemented by the state. School principals, especially at the lower socio-economic level, see poverty as a problem that averts academic failure. Therefore, school principals working in schools with lower socio-economic level tend to meet the basic needs of the student first, rather than academic achievement, if there is a resource available in the school. School principals working in schools located in lower socio-economic level see the consequences of social inequality more closely and experience the problem more realistically.

Instead of Result

In this study examining the relationship between academic failure and social inequality within the framework of the opinions of the school principals, a conclusion has been reached supporting the claims that cultural capital is an important factor in academic achievement. The school principals who participate in the research consider the concept of cultural capital as 'stimuli', 'family consciousness', or 'family culture' and consider them to be more important in academic achievement than income, and so don't relate academic failure to social inequality. School principals do not show any change according to the socio-economic level of the school to establish this relationship.

School principals say that academic failure can be solved by the policies of the state and that the academic failure will continue in the school unless the inequality in the society is eliminated. School principals working in schools at lower socio-economic level can see the consequences of social inequality better, and they see that eliminating poverty in society is more significant than increasing academic achievement.

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Personal Information of Principals

- P1-U** The school principal in school 1 in the upper SEL, men, associate's degree, class teacher, 21 years as a principal, professional seniority 31.
- P2-L** The school principal in school 2 in the lower SEL, men, associate's degree, Turkish teacher, 15 years as a principal, professional seniority 23.
- P3-L** The school principal in school 3 in the lower SEL, men, bachelor's degree, class teacher, 16 years as a principal, professional seniority 28.
- P4-U** The school principal in school 4 in the upper SEL, men, bachelor's degree, mathematics teacher, 25 years as a principal, professional seniority 33.
- P5-M** The school principal in school 5 in the middle SEL, women, bachelor's degree, physics teacher, 14 years as a principal, professional seniority 23.
- P6-M** The school principal in school 6 in the middle SEL, men, bachelor's degree, geography teacher, 13 years as a principal, professional seniority 22.
- P7-L** The school principal in school 7 in the lower SEL, men, master degree, class teacher, 9 years as a principal, professional seniority 17.
- P8-U** The school principal in school 8 in the upper SEL, men, bachelor's degree, class teacher, 17 years as a principal, professional seniority 31.
- P9-M** The school principal in school 9 in the middle SEL, men, bachelor's degree, class teacher, 9 years as a principal, professional seniority 14.

About the Author

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