

Rural Education: How Successful Low-Income Students Received Socio-Educational Supports from Families, School Teachers and Peers?

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v10-i1/8988>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v10-i1/8988

Published Online: 28 February 2021

Abstract

The current study explored how socio-economic problems affected rural students academic achievement and also examined how successful rural students from low-income families received socio-cultural supports from their parents, teachers and peers. The study utilised a multi-site case study involving five successful rural students from low-income families in Malaysia who have been selected using purposive random sampling technique. An interview protocol containing semi-structured questions was used to collect narrative data. Data collected was analysed using thematic approach. Results revealed that socio-economic problems have affected affected students' motivation and emotion. Results also revealed that the parents of all informants had good attitudes in supporting their children education even though they had financial limitation. This highlights the importance of parental survival skills and psychological stability for promoting children academic well-being. The current study also has confirmed that socio-cultural factors play significant roles to support learning for rural students. As helping skills among rural parents, teachers and rural peers are significance for students' success; a specific community educational module need to be developed as a guideline for them to enhance their roles in providing educational support effectively.

Keywords: Rural Students, Rural Parents, Low-Income Families, Successful Students

Introduction

Research on education for rural communities is very important because rural communities worldwide faced various challenges due to unpredictable of global economic changes. Nowadays, there is a high demand for new ways in learning especially with regards to the use of virtual technology in education. All parents irrespective of where they live need to have appropriate current technological gadgets to access into on-line learning. In this situation, rural communities are facing problems due to limitation of internet facilities as well as sufficient technological support systems that allow rural children to participate in learning activities. Indeed, rural communities have been in dilemma either focusing on economic-oriented activities for live survival or educational-oriented activities for their future life. Until now, many children in rural communities are needed by parents to involve in economic

activities in order to support a basic need for their families. At the same time, their children need to attend schools. As a result, many rural children had a poor attendance, poor academic achievement and left schools at early stages. It shows that it is so difficult for rural children to give their commitments fairly. However, there are few rural students from low-income families who are able to overcome this problem. They are successful in education even though their families are poor and face various economic challenges. How such students survive and succeed in their studies needs to be studied. In addition, it is significant to explore how successful rural students from low-income families receive support from the social environment. Thus, this study explores the following areas:

- good academic achievers from low-income families, and
- nature of socio-environmental support received by low-income families to help them excel in their studies.

Socioeconomic and Social Issues

Many past studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between economic stability and academic achievement. This is because high-income families have many opportunities to get various supports. On the other hand, low-income families face constraints to gain support for better learning. In fact, past studies have also shown that poor families had problems to fulfil the needs of current learning support. The world population data showed that the majority of rural communities had a lower income compared to urban communities. Rural communities also have problems to communicate with the outside world due to the lack of communication technological infrastructure facilities.

Past studies have also shown that family economic problems also affect the emotional and psychological status among family members. There is a lot of stress in the family nowadays due to high expenses for monthly utility bills, daily necessities and various complex needs. Low-income families are struggling to manage their expenses and generate income. They are at risk society and will be trapped in poverty life. Poverty has been found to have a direct impact on well-being and wellness status. Wadsworth et al. (2008) found that economic pressures are associated with health problems and psychological dysfunction. Mental health problems including depression can also be occurred for those who have family financial problems.

Many past studies confirmed that poverty has a negative impact on learning among children. The study carried out by Betancur, Votruba and Schunn (2018) showed that parental education and family income affect their children academic achievement. There is a large gap related to parental income and education (Galindo and Sonnenschein, 2015). Higher levels of parental education is associated with significant educational improvements and achievements.

Education in Rural Communities

According to Shakespeare (2012) rural communities live in hardship because rapid developments are likely to be occurred in urban rather than rural areas. The majority of poor rural population worldwide are farmers, ranchers and fishermen (Muda, Amin and Omar (2018). Saidi, Sino and Othman. (2018) found that the majority of the rural population had problem to pay attention into their children education. the study They also faced financial issues to provide modern educational supports. Ramli, Dawood & Som (2019) had conducted research on the rural fishing community where it has been found that the majority of them

can only afford their children's school expenses up to the secondary school level. They are not able to finance higher education fees for their kids.

A study carried out by Gorleku, Brancaccio & Campbell (2018) in rural schools in Ghana found that there was a direct link between economic conditions and student well-being. The study demonstrated that many parents from rural poor families had communication problems with their children. In fact, they are not able to provide a good learning atmosphere for their children's learning. Numerous past studies have proven that family economic background affects students' academic achievement and it has been found to play a more important role than the school environment (Arnold & Doctoro, 2003; Reardon, 2011; Lawson & Farah, 2017). The study of Qishan Chen et al. 2018 in China shows that the socio-economic status affects the students' ability in learning many things as well as had an impact on their relationship with parents. It also affects motivation of students. Harmonious parental relationships are an essential component of healthy physical, mental and cognitive development for children (Jeynes, 2007).

Another study in Ghana has been carried out by Abotsi, Yaganumah and Screwdriver (2018) who found that there is a relationship between poverty and school drop-out. This issue has been raised for more than 20 years until now. For instance, a study carried out by Devine's (1996) found that poverty and low parental educational background have a significant relationship with children's school drop-out rates. Economic problems in this case including transportation problems to school and poor support mechanisms for low-income families from rural areas. Cultural factors also contribute to educational problems among rural communities. For instance, marriage at a young age becomes a factor in the school drop-out among rural communities in several places in undeveloped countries (Malhotra, 2010).

Socio-Educational Supports in Rural Communities

Socio-educational support refers to the diversity of support and assistance that create better learning ecologies. Two main components of socio-educational support are social and educational support systems. Social support system involves psychological, emotional, spiritual and even intellectual support. It is closely related to the extent to which human relationships, social, interpersonal and intra-personal interactions are utilized by a person to ensure effective learning. The second component is related to educational support systems that are directly related to enhance learning experience. These components are interdependent each other. It will be able to build a conducive learning ecology. Learning ecologies refer to environments that promote learning culture, either in the local community, home environment and school life. Productive learning ecologies are very important in determining learning success among students. A study carried out by Batjo and Ambotang (2019) found that productive learning ecologies in schools affects students' academic achievement positively. Another study in rural areas in Malaysia found that the government has provided various forms of assistance to the school community. As a result, it has helped many teachers and students to commit into teaching and learning activities. Arbaa, Jamil and Razak (2010) found that teaching quality has a close link to students' learning commitment in rural areas. Creative teaching for rural students will motivate rural students to engage in various learning activities. Many past studies confirmed that teachers' enthusiastic in teaching and always committed to their duties have a positive impact on the academic achievement among rural students (Ahmad, Amzah and Aman, 2009). According to Wubbels and Levy (1991), teacher's behaviour in the classroom environment is important because it can affect student motivation and achievement (Awang, Jindal-Snape & Barber 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study are as follows:

- To explore how socio-economic problems affected rural students academic achievement especially in terms of maintaining good grades, and
- to examine how successful rural students from low-income families received socio-cultural supports from their parents, teachers and peers.

Methodology

This study uses a multi-site case study or also known as collective case studies design. According to Stake (1995), the case study is a specific, a complex and functioning thing. The case that is focused on is the case of rural poor students who excel in their studies. The method of data collection is by interview using semi-structured interview protocol. The selection of the study sample is purposive sampling (Yin 1987) i.e. students who excel in examinations from low-income families. Stake (1995) highlighted that the selection of the case should be based upon what can be learned from the case. The case should maximize what can be learned. In Malaysia, students earning less than USD1078 (MYR4360) are categorized in the B40 group which is a poor community that must be given serious attention. The narrative data collected were transcribed and analyzed using a themed approach. A analysis of this narrative data is done using Atlas.ti data software.

Findings and Discussion

This qualitative study involved five samples (3 female students, 2 male students) aged 17 years old.

Informants' Profiles

Informant 1 is an Iban female student. Her father worked as a farmer while his mother was a housewife. Her father's monthly income is USD200. Informant 2 is a Malay male student. His father was a fisherman while his mother was a housewife. His father's monthly income is USD400. Informant 3 is an Iban male student. His father was a general labourer and his mother was a housewife. His father's monthly income is USD500. Informant 4 is an Iban female student. Her father is no longer working while her mother is a full time housewife. Both her parents were uneducated and unemployed. Their monthly income is less than USD200. Informant 5 is an Iban female student. Her father works as a security guard and her mother is a housewife. His father's education was up to sixth grade while his mother was in Form Six. His father's income is RM300 a month. It is important to explore how these socio-economic backgrounds affect educational achievement among their kids.

Socio-economic Problems: Hindrance to Sustain Good Academic Achievements

Findings from this study revealed that all excellent rural students from low-income families have affected students' motivation to focus in their studies.

"It is quite stressful for me to focus on education. Difficult for me to motivate myself. Conflicts ... between financial and learning." Informant 4 (Female, Iban, 17 years old).

Some informants reported that they use their own financial savings to support their education.

"Oh ... my father's has no permanent job ... and my mother is not working ... she is a full time housewife. I had some savings in my account ... we use it to while support life .. it is a bit stressful for me as the money should be used for my future education ,, but it is okay, as long as we can live happily," Informant 5 (Female, Iban, 17 years old)

Lack of economic stability has also resulted in limitation to have good reference books. It makes them unable to buy reference books and get access to academic assistance (such as tuition and personal guidance).

"Financial problems do exist in my family. If you want to go to school, you need to buy many things. Always not enough money to buy many things in order support my learning activities, " Informant 1 (Female, Iban, 17 years old)

Results of the study also revealed that socio-economic problems have also affected the informants' academic achievement sustainability due to inferiority complexes and low self-efficacy.

How Low-income Parents Support Their Children Education?

Findings of the study show that rural students from low-income families and succeed in their study had two types of socio-cultural supports from their parents i.e. monitoring practices and social educational motivation.

Theme 1: Socio-cultural support in-terms of monitoring practices

Findings of the study revealed that parents of the successful students are committed in monitoring their kids achievement in school. They always had discussion with their kids to check the performances and find solutions to ensure their kids are able to gain good grades.

"Hmmm... they (my parents) often asked me to improve my achievement in academics .. especially when the previous results are not good enough , "Informant 1 (Female, Iban, 17 years old)

"Once I had a poor achievement, my parents asked me ... why my performance was declining. So, I know that they pay attention into my studies," Informant 2 (Male, Malay, 17 years)

"My parents' reaction?, Yes, especially my mother ... she was very proud and happy when she saw my good result," Informant 3 (Male, Iban, 17 years old)

"They always told me that I need to do it again and again they are not angry at me but they just want me to success in studies," Informant 5 (Female, Iban, 17 years old)

Theme 2: Socio-cultural support in-terms of social educational motivation.

All Informants stated that their parents always provided various types of social educational motivations including praise, encouragement and rewards.

"They (my parents) always ask me to focus on my studies. They often advice me and encourage me to obtain a better academic result, " Informant 1 (Female, Iban, 17 years old)

"Encouragement from my mother ... always ... it is hard for me without her support ..., "
Informant 2 (Male, Malay, 17 years)

Two themes emerged from narrative data in this study are socio-cultural support in-terms of monitoring practices and social educational motivation. This finding is parallel with the past studies carried out by Ismail, Salleh & Jemali (2016) who found that parenting style is important for academic well-being of children. The findings of this study have supported the past study of parental motivation that has been found to be very significant role for a student to achieve better academic result (Subra, Abdullah and Devi 2019). Parents have high confidence and aspirations will be ready to provide moral support for children to succeed in education. According to Marchant, Paulson and Rothlisberg (2001), parents' attitudes determine students' learning behaviour. Results from this study is also in-line with the past study carried out of Saidi, Sino and Othman (2018) who found that although parents have low economic but they still prioritize the education of children. This study was also parallel with the study of Betancur, Votruba and Schunn (2018) who found that the family economic affects student achievement.

How Low-income Students Received Support from School Teachers?

Findings revealed that school teachers provide various support into students from low-income families. In this study, two main themes emerged from the data are teachers' personal initiative and motivational strategies. Teachers' Personal Initiative (Theme 1) explains on how teachers are taking their own strategies to help students. Findings revealed that many teachers have been found to help all students irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed, the teachers had carried out their own initiative to guide students in academic subjects, organise extra classes, distribute notes and do additional academic exercises. Teachers' Motivational Strategies (Theme 2) refers to overt behaviour of teachers in supporting students' learning activities. Findings revealed that many teachers often motivate excellent rural students from low-income families to focus on their studies. The majority of teachers encouraged students to do more exercises, further readings, discussion and memorize important formulas relating to academic subjects. The teachers also always communicated with excellent rural students from low-income families to be role models for other students.

Results from this study are synchronising with many past studies as it has highlighted the importance of teachers' roles to promote learning behaviour (Awang, Jindal-Snape & Barber 2019). Marzuki (2005) found that a quality teacher has a unique character to help students in learning many things. Positive attitudes of teachers have been found to be contributing factors into student learning commitment (Ahmad, Amzah and Aman. 2009). This study supports the past study carried out by Saad, Baharuddin and Ismail (2017) as well as Batjo and Ambotang (2019) who found that competent teachers will give high commitment and concern for learning needs, problems faced by students, make fair student assessments, make clinical guidance, provide in-depth understanding of the subjects taught and further cultivate students' interest and determination to strive for excellence.

How Low-income Students Received Support from Peers?

This study found that successful rural students from low-income families are always surrounded by good peers. For instance, the informants reported that:

"We always talk to each other on how to obtain good grades .. all of us shared the same goal ... we want to success in life, " Informant 2 (Men, Malay, 17 years)

"Yes. My friends always encourage me to achieve better academic results, " Informant 3 (Male, Iban, 17 years old)

Data from this study has conformed the statement that students are not only learn from school activities but also from social environment from peers and surrounding ecologies (Ismail, Salleh & Jemali, 2016). Alsagoff (1983) states that peers play a role in influencing students' commitment in academic activities.

Conclusion

Overall, this study has identified the extent to which socio-economic factors influence the academic achievement of rural students. It is clear from this study that socio-economic problems have affected students' motivation as well emotion. Students are stressful to focus on their studies where the financial budget for educational purposes are limited. However, this study found that all the parents had good attitudes to support their children education even though they had financial limitation. This highlights the importance of parental survival skills and psychological stability for promoting children academic well-being. The current study also has confirmed that socio-cultural factors play significant roles to support learning for rural students. It is important for rural students to get good support from parents, teachers and peers in order to make them succeed in education. However, there is limitation of the data from this study to explore the helping skills among rural parents, teachers and rural peers; especially when comes to help rural students from low-income families to have good academic results. Therefore, a specific community education module need to be developed as it will be guidelines for them to play their roles in educational excellence or rural community.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to the Faculty of Education, the National University of Malaysia for the providing a great support to carry out this research successfully. Appreciation to the Ministry of Education Malaysia for supporting this research through FRGS/1/2015/SSI09/UKM/02/3 entitled Bullying Preventive Modules for Secondary School Students.

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