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European Journal of Experimental Biology, 2013, 3(1):705-708



An anthropological approach into the culture of slum living and students' educational status

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ABSTRACT

Slum living is an urban phenomenon akin to the recent decades, and the reason why it has obsessed the minds of researchers is due to the problems and difficulties it brings about for its residents and citizens. What the present research is after is to investigate the anthropological culture of slum living via qualitative methods and its relation to the educational status of the students dwelling in such regions. For this purpose, the slum region "Hesar Khate Chahar", which is 40 kms far from Tehran and located in Karaj, was picked up for study. The goal of this study is, in fact, to identify the different qualities of life in this region by means of a deep view from "introspection". The results of this research show there are two types of families inhabiting this area that enjoys two different attitudes toward their children's education. Both groups are economically poor, but what differentiate between them are their cultural attitudes toward the education of boys and girls. Their economic and social statuses are identical, but the cultural differences these families enjoy have brought about a disparity in the success and failure of their children. Testimonies reveal that the families with a rather higher level of culture that have resided in this area over a longer period of time, and are more conversant with the cultures of urban and slum living, have more successful children in comparison with other families.

Key words: economic poverty, educational failure, slum living, cultural poverty

INTRODUCTION

Not completing one's education in its early stages is followed by lots of individual and social damages. The adolescents who play the role of adults at an early age undergo severe harms in adulthood. The more educational experience they gain during adolescence, the better they will be prepared to face life's challenges in adult years (Pearson & Newcomb, 2000: 568). The family provides a situation which can play the main role in the future educational lives of children. Familial experiences can influence their educational performance and thus have crucial impacts on the next period of their lives. Some of these experiences are namely the devastation of the family, authoritative conducts, level of education, and parents' income (Ramburger, 1995: 601). One of the studies shows that dropouts are more from the families that have low incomes. The results of the study reveal that students who come from low-income families have two times more a chance of dropping a course than those of the families who earn a living 20% more than low social-class ones (Philip Kaufman & Steve Klein, 1997: 342). In other words, the socioeconomic status of the family has a reverse relation to educational subsidence (Astin, 1972, Eckland 1964).

Factors such as low incomes, improper accommodation, lack of protection and presence of parents in the family, and multiplicity of children influence their dropping courses. Parents' difficulties in trying to earn a living and their numerous preoccupations for that purpose make them neglect their children, and in fact, paralyze a true relationship essential for a healthy life. Hence, the effects of such a living would ruin their potentials within a few years.

The destructive influences on educational failure could be divided into two categories, namely, the internal and the external factors. Gama (1999) and others believe that the factors of educational failure include economic, psycho-social and familial problems. Willis (1986) believes factors such as familial structure, poverty and economic conditions, race and kinship, language, residential place and sexuality are closely akin to students' educational failure. At this stage of growth, adolescents are inevitably affected by their friends and peers. Research studies show that peers have a considerable influence on the educational performance of their friends (Hillinan & Williams, 1990:125, Pearson & Newcomb, 2000:570). In other words, dependence on friends or conversely, rejection by peers can affect educational performance at school and be a portent of dropping out of it. One should consider that educational failure or subsidence bring with it many socioeconomic consequences. According to the American Office of Statistics, in 2008, 47% of those students who have enjoyed low incomes have not covered the secondary school (Dimaria, 2010). It is worthy of note that "the poor children of today are the poor adults of tomorrow" (Linchter, 1997). Youngsters who leave school before its time have vague careers and are more likely to be deviated to wrong ways.

The Theoretical Literature of the Research

The literature of the subject implies that the relationship between socioeconomic inequality and formal education has more a long-lasting empirical background than a theoretical one. That is, most accomplished works and unpublished controversies signify vast field studies or empirical ones that have waged through the relationship between inequality and education. Besides socio-economic inequality, there are of course other inequalities such as sexual, tribal and racial ones that have sometimes been heeded. One of the classic researches accomplished in the USA in the 1960s belongs to James Samuel Coleman. The results of his studies were more informative than the widest sociological research studies accomplished till that time, and included data about half a million students, published in 1966 (Giddens, 1973:454). Coleman and his colleagues who were after the causes of students' lack of access to educational opportunities were able to depict those more successful students were better educated than others. In addition, they concluded that the qualities of schools had not had positive and assessable effects on the educational progress of students. The only quality that had a stable relation with educational performance was students' social classes. That is, middle-class and higher middle-class students were more successful than those belonging to the deprived social class.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the present study, two methods have been employed, namely, qualitative and quantitative ones. First, utilizing the survey method, some information about the cognitive, economic, and social qualities of the respondents, the indices of the culture of poverty and economic poverty has been elicited, and then the qualitative methods of observation and interview have been deployed. Here, cooperative observation has been exercised. Participant Observation could be defined as a strategy for field study, which simultaneously combines the analysis of documents, interviews with respondents and informed people and introspection. This method is commonly used for the study of subcultures (Flick, 2006:244). The community under study is the inhabitants of "Hesar Khate Chahar" chosen randomly, and includes families who have been living in this region for between 5 and 20 years. In this study, there are no predetermined hypotheses, but they have been shaped throughout data collection and research.

This region has common characteristics similar to any other slum region. Besides the undesirable appearance of the houses and the existing disorder, what makes this area outstanding and investigable is the extensive presence of smugglers and drug dealers. The native inhabitants of this region are all fed up with the status quo and intend to abandon it, yet the houses are not high-priced to make them afford other houses in other areas. On the other hand, these people are afraid of becoming tenants; therefore as it is evident, in addition to economic poverty, this region suffers from insecurity. However, the problem is the inhabitants are not as unhappy and worried about their children's education, scores, or perhaps their dropping out of school as they are about riff-raffs and drug dealers. In Iran, especially in the poverty-stricken slum regions, the areas where immigrants dwell, and the deprived rustic areas, factors such as environmental deprivation, dissimilarities and inequalities in facilities compared to urban and prosperous areas, malnutrition, the great number of family members, students' having to work due to economic

poverty and hence leaving their studies incomplete even in primary schools, are the main factors that influence educational failure (Salsabili, Ghasemi, 2005).

Families with Rather Successful Children in Education

In this study, we faced two types of families. Those who value their children's education very much, and try hard for that purpose; however, compared to other families, the number of such families is not many. They are mostly from among the older inhabitants of the area, whose incomes enjoy a proportionately higher stability. They are well conversant with the status quo and the insecurity of the area. They accompany their daughters to school, and at night when it is more unsafe, they even accompany their boys to the end of the streets. They deem education to be their own salvation and a way toward brighter prospects for their children, and yearn for their admission to university. As regards the fact that the houses are very small and there is not a separate study room for their children, these families have tried to build a small attic-like room on the roof, or move the kitchen to a corner of the yard so that children will study in greater peace at the time of examinations. Their concern is about the courses with which there are no one to help their children when they face a problem. Courses like English and mathematics for which tutoring costs a lot. Makeup classes are not close to the region, and even if there are any, not everybody is able to afford them. Some of such students are on the verge of dropping out of school. The recognition of the students exposed to the peril of dropping out of school is one of the important measures taken in schools because getting back to school those who quit education is really hard, and this will get harder if they start work and earn a salary however little. The significant point worthy of note about these families is that the longer they inhabit this area, the more familiar they will be with the culture of urban living, and this is why children speak Persian well, even if it is not their first language. This is owing to the fact that knowing another language and dialect is influential in students' educational progress.

Families Whose Children Have Dropped out of School

Here we encounter families whose children, girl or boy, have dropped out of school. The number of these families is more than that of previous ones. Most of the boys embark on quitting their education because of earning an income. This, however, does not come to fruition since at that age, they do not obtain a proper job with the education they have had: distributing publicity brochures, construction work, working in fruit markets, collecting different types of garbage under the supervision of employers, and even unemployment, which lead to other problems for the families. In a region where the upper-class inhabitants embark on buying, selling and smuggling drugs, and earn quite a great deal of money in this way, studying is a waste of time in boys' opinion. On the one hand, this idea that education will not necessarily be useful in the future, and on the other, the lack of interest in studies and the weak bases of education on their part, make the boys quit their education. From their own and their families' points of view, education is not much of use, and one cannot work with that. Of course, the fact that how much applicable these courses are, and if students do not want to continue their studies, can they find work with school knowledge, requires another research. The high volume of school books and their variety are tiresome and useless for the students whose parents are not literate enough to help them with their studies. Girls do not enjoy better conditions. One of the reasons why they quit education is their premature marriages which take a high percentage. In their parents' opinion, girls must do the housekeeping, whether they study or not. The number of the families that are unhappy about their daughters' dropping out of school is few. Moreover, most families prevent girls from coming and going out of home due to the insecurity prevalent in the area. Some of the families live in conditions that make it practically impossible for children to study. For families in which the father or the mother is addicted to drugs, their children and often boys, have to earn a living. One cannot ignore the adolescent subculture in this region that holds the view that studying is what "the sissy kids" do. It does not value and honor education, and strengthens this attitude among its members. Therefore, for those who live in such conditions and intend to continue their studies, there are problems caused by their peers in the same area, who reject them and do not socialize with them. This "anti-educational" subculture exists in schools as well. In the early years of primary school, students can tackle their study problems and do not necessarily need any assistance from their family members. But as soon as they enter junior-high-school, they encounter problems with courses like English language and mathematics. There are no people at home where they can get help from, and due to mischief at school, they often get rejected by their teachers. Therefore, facing problems with one or two courses, they feel discouraged, fall short of studies, and start thinking about dropping out of school. From among 30 report cards of the students who had quit education, the researcher found out that they had had problems with the aforementioned two courses. We asked these 30 students to take up courses in summer classes we would hold for them so that they would sit the Shahrivar exams (in the summer), but only 15 out of 30 students consented to take part in the classes. The rest who were mainly boys said, "We have to labor for work after all! With or without a diploma". Families whose children suffer from educational subsidence

are mostly overpopulated, non-Persian speakers, and live in adverse economic conditions. The lack of dominance over Persian language causes many problems for students from the very early years of primary school. Some families that have recently migrated to this region do not know Persian, so we were required to have an interpreter with us for the interviews. Now how can these people dictate a passage to their primary children? Many factors affect students' educational subsidence, but one should not disregard the external factors which take a higher percentage. The external factors include conditions of the ambience both at home and in one's neighborhood, which based on the interviews, are given a high rate.

CONCLUSION

Attempts to reduce or eliminate the phenomenon of educational subsidence, besides the decrease in economic losses, bring about the reduction of psychosocial problems in society, and lead to strengthening human resources in a country. Provided that we consider literacy to be one of the indices of human development, the necessity to read and write in the preliminary level cannot help its progress. It is true that in the region under study most people are literate, but their literacy is reduced to reading and writing only. On the other hand, the educational system had better turn to defining courses in such a way that all types of people will benefit from them. Theoretical courses that have no application and are difficult gradually prompt students who have adverse conditions to be discouraged and quit the courses. Another noteworthy point is that all the families inhabiting this region have TV sets, yet it seems like the programs on TV have not been able to more or less alter their attitudes toward girls' education and its value. The national media had better prime the types of programs that will help this faction with their study problems, and moreover the programs should better be based on a positive approach to education. One should of course not disregard the importance of teaches in this field.

The other issue about the region under study is that it lacks the necessary security, and is the center of buying and selling drugs. And because drug dealing is money-making despite being a crime, youngsters may think about entering this occupation to earn money, which is suitable for neither themselves nor the future of their families. In this region, most adolescents have their own special subculture in which they do not esteem education, and studying is inhibited in some way. This study, however, has not investigated the effects of schools on the educational process of children, and it is recommended that it be researched in later studies. That is, the schools where students belonging to low socioeconomic classes study.

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