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### Career and Educational Experiences of School Dropouts with Low Socioeconomic Status and High Hopelessness Level

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#### Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate in depth the school experiences and career status and choices of individuals who are school dropouts with low socioeconomic level and high hopelessness levels to this end, Consensual Qualitative Research, a qualitative data analysis method, was used. A total of 10 school dropouts participated in the study. Preliminary findings showed that female students who dropped out of school could not be accessed by routes like Skype. The study revealed that dropping out of school influences the career development of participants. Furthermore, the following domains related to school dropout emerged through the data analysis: (a) reasons for school dropout and (b) career process and choices.

**Keywords:** School dropout, career choices, career process, career counseling, Turkey.



## **Introduction**

School dropout refers to a student leaving an educational institution before completing their academic stage (Entwistle et al., 2004). It is a prevalent issue globally, carrying significant implications for individuals. Numerous organizations have conducted studies to assess the prevalence of school dropout. According to European Statistical reports (EUROSTAT, 2017), the average school dropout rate among individuals aged 18 to 24 is 10.6%. Croatia boasts the lowest rate at 3.1%, while Turkey has the highest rate at 32.5%. Reports from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) underscore the correlation between school dropout rates and individuals not in employment, education, or training (NEET). Countries with high NEET rates tend to have correspondingly high school dropout rates. The country with the lowest NEET rate among 18- to 24-year-olds is Iceland at 5%. This rate is 12% in Canada, 19% in Ireland and Portugal, 15% in the USA, 28% in Italy, and 32% in Turkey (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). Data from both EUROSTAT and OECD reports indicate that Turkey faces significant challenges concerning school dropout rates. Therefore, it is imperative to examine school dropout issues in countries like Turkey, where dropout rates are notably elevated.

## **Literature Related to School Dropout**

School dropout is a complex and multifaceted issue, making it challenging to comprehensively explain using a singular theory. Various theories addressing this topic reveal that the factors contributing to school dropout are diverse and varied. For example, Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, and Hawkins (2000), as well as Bronfenbrenner (1994), have analyzed school dropout as a multi-dimensional concept. They suggest that an individual's decision to drop out of school can be influenced by personal factors such as drug use, involvement in criminal activities, risky behavior, and academic struggles; school-related aspects like peer influence, school structure, and overall climate; family dynamics including weak relationships and economic stability; and demographic characteristics like socioeconomic status and gender (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). However, these theories primarily focus on explaining the situation in Western countries, with limited literature available to illuminate school dropout patterns in non-Western nations. Comprehensive research on school dropout from a multi-dimensional perspective is limited. However, studies on the causes of dropout in developing countries with at-risk populations like Turkey reveal common trends. Students showing behavioral issues such as frequent absences, substance abuse, academic deficiencies, low quality of life, and suicidal tendencies are more likely to leave school. Discipline problems like violence, conflicts, disrespect towards educators, and negative peer interactions also contribute to the risk of dropout. In a study interviewing individuals who dropped out of high school, the reasons for school dropout were examined and accordingly, due to the participants' experiences, the reasons for dropping out of high school were academic failure, unwillingness and dislike of school, discipline and health problems, students' relationships with Their friends, teachers-administrators and families on their decision to leave school (Bayhan & Dalgıç, 2012). Family influence is another significant factor in school dropout. Negative attitudes towards children, crowded households, in-family problems, and low

socioeconomic status are associated with a higher dropout risk (Araque et al., 2009; Bridgeland, 2010; Ferreira et al., 2007; Franklin, & Trouard, 2016; Rumberger et al., 1990; Smits, & Hoşgör, 2006; Parr, & Bonitz, 2015; Şahin et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2017). Additionally, setting high career expectations for a child by the school or family can also increase the likelihood of dropout (Ferreira et al., 2007). Boyacı and Öz (2018), who analyzed family expectations within the scope of social capital, stated that social capital-related reasons such as family involvement in the school, school involvement in the family, problems in student-teacher relations, and the negative impact of peer groups inside and outside the school come to the forefront in the student dropout process.

Various factors contributing to school dropout originate from the individual, as well as from influences within the family, school, or peer group environments. Given the complexity of this issue, it is imperative for countries like Turkey, facing challenges in this area, to thoroughly investigate the school dropout phenomenon. Among these outcomes, reduced potential income and negative effects on economic development in a country (Farah, & Upadhyay, 2017; Hayes et al., 2002), increased demands for social support offered by the state, increased antisocial behavior and crime rates (Hayes et al., 2002), negative working conditions and low work satisfaction (Cedefop, 2016), working in jobs requiring less education and having low quality of life (Doll, & Hess, 2001), and development of low health markers (Hayes et al., 2002) may be listed. This examination should consider the economic implications and individual outcomes such as reduced work satisfaction and quality of life associated with school dropout. All these reasons may cause individuals to face intense feelings of hopelessness. In particular, disadvantaged groups may perceive more limited options and may have more barriers (Lent et al., 1999), which may result in having to cope with feelings of hopelessness (London, 1983) .

### **Aim of the Study**

When assessing the factors causing school dropout, it becomes clear that school dropout has a complex structure and is influenced by various factors. There have been limited studies attempting to thoroughly investigate the multifaceted issue of school dropout from a multidimensional perspective, particularly examining the connections between school dropout and career development. While there are studies exploring the career paths of individuals who dropped out of school (e.g., Kim, 2013), these studies were conducted in Western countries and may be outdated. Therefore, it can be argued that understanding the reasons for school dropout and its impacts on career development requires considering individuals' own explanations and narratives, which are highly valued in the social sciences (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Especially given the uncertain nature of employment in the 21st century, career counselors are increasingly using narrative models and methods to recognize the significance of personal stories in people's lives (McMahon, 2017; Savickas, 2011). Thus, employing narrative methods to explore school dropout cases is crucial for conducting in-depth investigations.

To date, there seems to be a lack of research on the school dropout experiences and career paths of individuals from disadvantaged groups, which are in the developmental stage socioeconomically. Furthermore, existing literature suggests that individuals from low socioeconomic

backgrounds (e.g., Franklin & Trouard, 2016; Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Wood et al., 2017) who experience feelings of hopelessness (Jonker, 2006) are more likely to drop out of school. Building on this understanding, the aim of this study was to thoroughly examine the school experiences, career status, and choices of individuals who have dropped out of school and belong to disadvantaged groups characterized by low socioeconomic status and high levels of hopelessness. From this point of view, this study seeks to answer the following question: What are the career choice processes and educational experiences of individuals with low socioeconomic status and high levels of hopelessness?

## Method

### Participants

Individuals who dropped out of school and met the following criteria were invited to participate in this study: 1. People working in temporary, full or part-time jobs at the time (when interviews were performed), 2. living in provinces in the southeast of the country and 3. had dropped out of high school. These criteria were developed in the name of being able to investigate the career status of individuals who were currently employed. Additionally, the reason for including the criteria of living in provinces in the southeast of the country and being a high school dropout was that the provinces with most common school dropout in Turkey are the southeast provinces and the most common dropout time is the high school period (Ministry of National Education, 2013). A pretest was applied to 49 randomly chosen participants (all male, age interval 16-18 years) who abided by these criteria. Our focus for this study was on people who self-reported having severe level of hopelessness along with low perceived socio-economic status. Twelve participants stating they had low perceived socioeconomic level and high levels of hopelessness points in the pretest results were determined. Later 2 participants rejected participation in the interview section, so interviews were completed with 10 participants. Our sample size is sufficient due to data saturation was reached (Hill, Thompson, & Nutt-Williams, 1997). In this sense, the data collection process was terminated as it was seen that the obtained codes started to repeat.

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics of the study group*

Table 1 shows that all of the participants are male. The ages of the participants range from 23 to 30 years. Eight participants work in temporary jobs. Additionally, when the occupations of participants are investigated, it appears most work as laborers in the construction sector. While 8 participants stated dropping out of school limited their career choices, 6 stated they were currently satisfied with their jobs.

### Tools

**Pretest Form.** The pretest form comprised two sections to choose participants for planned interviews. The first section included questions about demographic characteristics like gender, perceived socioeconomic level, and phone number and related to contact information if they agreed to participate in interviews. The second section included the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) with the aim of measuring the hopelessness levels of participants.

The BHS was developed by Beck, Weissman, Lester and Trexler (1974) and was adapted to Turkish by Seber (1991) (cited Savaşır, & Şahin, 1997). The BHS comprises a total of three factors of “feelings about the future”, “loss of motivation” and “future expectations” and 20 items. The BHS total score ranges from 0 to 20 (Beck et al., 1974). When assessing points obtained by participants on the BHS, the point intervals prepared by Beck and Steer (1998) were used. Accordingly, scores ranging from 0 to 3 as are considered within the normal range, 4 to 8 identify mild hopelessness, 9 to 14 identify moderate hopelessness, and scores greater than 14 identify severe hopelessness (Beck & Steer, 1988).

**Career and Educational Story Form (CESF).** When creating this form, studies of disadvantages groups were used (e.g., Smith et al., 2014). The CESF comprises a total of 18 open-ended questions with the aim of collecting information about the career and education experiences of individuals. Open-ended questions were used in order not to restrict the participants’ responses (Hill et al., 1997). Sample questions include ‘what type of problems did you encounter in school?’ ‘how did you try to solve the problems encountered in school?’ and ‘what are your career dreams?’

### **Process**

The process of gathering data was conducted between 2019 and 2020. The study was announced to teachers who worked at vocational high schools and these teachers notified their ex-students who had dropped out of school about the study. Firstly, the pretest prepared as a Google form was applied to participants through these teachers. From these participants, 12 participants with high mean hopelessness levels and low perception of socioeconomic level, who volunteered for interviews and provided a contact number were chosen. Thus, a total of 10 participants who agreed to be interviewed were interviewed between December 15, 2019 and February 3, 2020. Convenient dates and hours for the interviews were determined with the volunteers, and the interviews were completed. The voluntary participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the ones who wished to proceed were included in the study. Furthermore, verbal informed consent was received from the volunteers. In this respect, participants were asked open-ended questions using the CESF. Before collecting data, to observe the understandability of the open-ended questions on the CESF by the target audience and to aid in refining the interview protocol, the form was applied to a person who had dropped out of school and some revisions were made. Semi-structured interviews lasting from 45 to 55 minutes and in 2 sessions were held with face-to-face methods like Skype. The reason for completing the interviews in two sessions is that it encouraged enough leeway to probe a rich understanding of participants’ experiences (Hill et al., 2005). Face-to-face interviews were chosen as the data collection method, because telephone respondents are more likely to present themselves in socially desirable ways than face-to-face respondents (Holbrook et al., 2003). Though there is no study to support this situation in Turkey, the researchers’ observations are that when the values of Turkish society are assessed, methods supporting face-to-face interviews like Skype give a positive impression to participants related to the research. As a result, interviews were held with online methods supporting face-to-face communication like Skype and in an office environment to encourage trust between participants and researchers. The exclusion criteria for the study are as

follows: not being accessible via methods like Skype and not providing verbal informed consent.

We followed the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) guidelines (Hill, et al. 1997; Hill, et al. 2005) for data collection and analysis. According to CQR, after gathering the data, the initial step was to transcribe the interviews. All primary team members listened to the audio tapes, and then all transcripts were reviewed by researchers, ensuring that no participant statements were missed. Subsequently, transcripts were sent to participants for review, and two of them made additions to their transcripts. Based on the final transcripts, the two primary team members developed and coded domains. They independently developed domains for three cases, then collaboratively reached a consensus. After achieving consensus, they worked on the remaining cases together and formulated core ideas. The consensus version was reviewed by two external auditors, who provided suggestions. The primary team carefully considered these suggestions, referring back to the raw data as needed, and made changes through consensus. Each team member shared their opinions, leading to equitable discussions and consensus. The similar educational backgrounds and strong interpersonal skills of the researchers and auditors, as well as their mutual respect, prevented power struggles. Selecting team members and auditors of equal standing avoided situations where individuals of lower status felt compelled to show undue respect or remain silent, as might be expected in our culture. To prevent biases related to the team's demographic characteristics, one female and one male primary team member and auditor were chosen, with consideration given to their differing theoretical orientations.

The primary team then conducted a cross-analysis by developing categories representing common themes from the core ideas within each domain. Each core idea was assigned to one or more relevant categories by team members. The auditors reviewed the cross-analyses and provided feedback, which the primary team considered and incorporated by consensus. This process was repeated iteratively until all agreed that the cross-analysis accurately represented the data. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, participants were given a copy of the final article to review and provide feedback, in addition to receiving transcripts of their interviews. Researchers need a thorough understanding of the subject matter to enhance the reliability of qualitative research. The second researcher has conducted numerous studies on career counseling and working with marginalized groups, holding a post-doctoral degree in counseling. The first researcher has focused on research involving marginalized groups and school counseling, accumulating significant experience in this field. Reactivity, a potential threat to the validity of qualitative research, refers to the impact of researchers on participants and the study environment. While it is challenging to entirely eliminate this influence, it must be acknowledged. To address reactivity in this study, the researchers aimed to maintain self-awareness during interviews when interacting with participants. To mitigate potential bias, the researchers avoided using leading questions during interviews, following Maxwell's (1996) recommendation. Additionally, they drew on counseling training and insights from qualitative data analysis workshops to inform their approach.

## Results

The following domains related to school dropouts emerged through the data analysis: (a) reasons for dropping out of school, and (b) career process and choices. See Figure 1 for a listing of the domains, categories, and subcategories.

‘Figure 1. *Domains, categories, and subcategories*’

### Preliminary Findings

Firstly, though the research lasted nearly a year, all participants were male. In spite of pretest data being collected through mediation of teachers working in formal educational institutions, the number of female participants who were school dropouts was low and it can be said that these dropouts could not be reached by Skype or similar methods.

### Findings related to Reasons for School Dropout

When participants’ explanations related to their school years are investigated, most of the participants stated they were bad at lessons. Additionally, rarely participants stated their grades were at moderate levels. Stated differently, it appears that academic failure was the reason for dropping out of school for most of the participants. When responses about the participants’ school years are investigated, most of the participants had specific talent in areas requiring special skills like painting or music; however, it is notable that they did not receive sufficient support in relation to this situation from teachers or similar resources. According to Participant E,

‘...Basically, I didn’t really like school lessons, I couldn’t do other lessons... I didn’t get it... I liked football in physical education lessons... My teachers didn’t interfere with me much. In fact, some even said don’t come, we won’t mark you absent, like...’

When responses by participants about experiences in their school years and time in school are investigated, academic failure can be said to be followed by academic status of parents, and insufficient family and teacher support. In relation to this, Participant C noted:

‘I wasn’t very good at my lessons. Like, at least one day a week I’d go to work with my father. At home no one paid us any attention. I wasn’t very good, like at lessons. I couldn’t manage it... My family’s situation wasn’t good enough to educate me... I didn’t have many friends, I didn’t get much support from my family and my teachers. So, when there was a problem there was no one to help me, there was no one to be a support. I was always alone, me...’

Half of the participants explained that one of their reasons for dropping out was a lack of motivation to go to lessons and/or school. In relation to this, Participant D explained, ‘... I had no interest in lessons... I was terrible... I was forced to go to school, I didn’t want to...’

Almost half of the participants stated that fights in school and bullying behavior toward them were effective in their act of leaving school.

A rare number of participants stated that one of their reasons for dropping out of school was teacher physical violence. In relation to this, Participant C explained, ‘I was a well-behaved student, but I started smoking at that

time. Sometimes when teachers caught me smoking, they belted me, so I gave up on school.'

### **Findings related to Career Choice Process**

#### **Work Experience**

When the work experience of participants is investigated, most of the participants appeared to work as laborers in the construction sector. Apart from construction workers, occupations like marketing, waiter, portage, barber, shoe-shining, baker, car salesman, plumber, chauffeur, animal husbandry and cleaning worker were among the jobs worked. Similarly, almost all of the participants said they had changed jobs at least two times.

#### **Career Values**

Almost all of the participants emphasized that profit-gain was their greatest career value. Additionally, a low number of participants stated that work-life balance was important in their careers. In relation to this, Participant A made the following statement:

'If there was a job with better wages of course I'd do it, why not... Money is important to me... If I had a better salary... If I had a job with a weekend holiday, it would be good for me. I have nearly no free time, is that life? I'm always working...'

#### **Career Barriers**

Most of the participants stated that not having a high school diploma was the largest obstacle in their careers, while a few of the participants stated they did not perceive any obstacles to their careers. Additionally, all participants who stated they did not perceive career obstacles appeared to have feelings of learned helplessness in their work experience. In relation to this, Participant K indicated;

'... Not having a high school diploma is always a problem... Applying to somewhere, first they ask about the diploma. I say I don't have one. Then they throw you out directly. In other words, I experienced many problems, still am experiencing them...'

#### **Career Expectations**

When the career dreams of participants are investigated, most of the participants appeared to want a job that involved prestige. Additionally, most of the participants did not appear to hope that they could have such a job. In relation to this, F gave the following statement:

'I want to open a small café. I want to decorated it with my own pictures... maybe if I had studied, I would be a famous painter. Because I love it a lot, I have talent for it. I wanted it a lot for instance. Or maybe I would be an art teacher, I would draw and have exhibitions... But when you don't study you put those things aside and I had to earn money by necessity... I don't think I can make these dreams come true again.'

In relation to this, K noted, 'Actually, when you look at it like that, I don't have many dreams, I don't have any expectations basically. Here we are alive, we're working, let's see where we end up...'

## **Discussion**

### **Preliminary Findings**

A result obtained in this study was that female students who dropped out of school could not be accessed through routes like Skype. When the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017) reports are examined, it was seen that graduation rates of female students are higher than males and the risk of dropout is higher among males in almost all countries. As a result, due to the lower number of female participants who dropped out of school in Turkey, female participants could not be reached during the nearly year-long process of the study. Similarly, a study in Turkey (Özer, 1991) explained that the higher risk of males dropping out is due to their having more possibility to work in jobs bringing income. Within the scope of this study, reports of reasons for school dropout such as the parents of participants having poor economic status is similar to results in the literature.

In addition to this, girls comprise a disadvantaged group in terms of schooling rate in underdeveloped countries. Though there are low numbers of school dropout among women, the reason for not reaching female participants is that females have lower schooling rates compared to males in the region of the study. A study by Bora and Taş (2017) in the same region obtained findings that female children did not continue to secondary education due to the scope of traditional roles for women.

### **Discussion related to Reasons for School Dropout**

Within the scope of this study, participants stated academic failure, lack of motivation, family economic status, lack of family support, lack of teacher support, physical abuse by teachers and bullying behavior were among reasons for dropping out of high school. When the relevant literature is investigated, it can be said that individuals who are failing in terms of academics (Bettinger, et al. 2012), with reduced motivation for lessons over time considering time spent in school as wasted time (Bridgeland, 2010), those receiving insufficient support from family (Rumberger, et al. 1990; Yıldırım, 2006) and teachers (Özer et al., 2011), those from families with poor economic status (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000), those exposed to peer bullying (Robison et al. 2017) and teacher physical violence (Doll et al. 2013; Şahin et al. 2016) have a tendency to drop out of school. Based on this, the findings obtained in this study appear to be in parallel with the literature.

When the findings obtained in the study are generally assessed, it can be said that school dropout of Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) and Bronfenbrenner (1994) was dealt with multidimensionally in terms of participants in this study. Accordingly, individuals dropping out of school is affected by a combination of individual, family, demographic and school-related factors.

### **Discussion related to Career Choice Process**

The findings obtained in the study show that the majority of participants frequently changed jobs. As none of the participants in the study had high school diplomas, they worked in jobs requiring less education. As a result, the majority worked in jobs with hard and negative conditions like the construction sector and it is considered they had to change jobs frequently due to these negativities. As stated in the relevant literature, individuals

who drop out of school are exposed to negative working conditions, do not receive enough satisfaction from their place of work and as a result frequently have to change jobs (Cedefop, 2016). Additionally, in parallel with the relevant literature (e.g., Doll, & Hess, 2001), participants appeared to work in low status jobs.

The most repeated values among participant responses were profit-gain, work-life balance and prestige. Since there is no known published research investigating career values of school dropouts, it is possible to consider most of the findings in this study as unique. In this sense, when the study conducted by Korkut Owen et al. (2012) is examined, it is seen that one of the 10 elements that university students attach most importance to in department choice is prestige value. In addition, it is important for participants working long hours to have time to spend for themselves and their lives and this appears to be supported by the literature (e.g., Doll, & Hess, 2001).

Several participants stated that not having a high school diploma was the largest barrier to their careers and those who did not state it was an barrier appeared to be within a process of acceptance. Individuals who are economically disadvantaged and have high hopelessness levels have limited access to educational and occupational opportunities because of political, economic, social, and cultural conditions (Olszewski-Kubilius, & Scott, 1992). In this sense, it can be said that especially when the hopelessness levels of disadvantaged groups increase, they can perceive obstacles more and have perceptions that their options are more limited (Kneebone & Holmes, 2016).

When responses about career dreams of participants are investigated, it appears they do not trust dreams related to careers or do not have such dreams. Considering the low hopelessness levels of participants in this study, it can be said the reason for the low quality and negative expectations and dreams for themselves may be related to hopelessness levels according the Beck et. al's (1974) hopelessness concept.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The current study results showed that reasons affecting school dropout were academic failure, parental academic status, insufficient teacher and family involvement, aversion to school life, economic conditions, peer bullying and teacher violence. Additionally, within the scope of the study, the career status and choices of individuals who dropped out of school were investigated; the work experience, career values, barriers and dreams of these individuals were determined. Based on the results of this study, it can be said that it would be important for professionals such as school counselors to plan preventive and remedial studies for individuals with dropout tendencies and families and teachers. In addition to this, it is necessary for policy makers to carry out work to instill hope and career planning for the career development of individuals who have dropped out of school. Finally, this study reached individuals living in the southeastern provinces of Turkey. The study may be repeated with individuals who have different cultural orientations such as different regions, socio-economic level. In addition, conducting studies addressing school dropout after the pandemic may create a meaningful outcome in terms of comparing the results with this study.

This research has some limitations. Firstly, as with any study with a small sample size, the results may not generalize to other dropouts living in other regions in Turkey. Secondly, the research did not reach any women who dropped out of school. As a result, the results of the research are limited to men who dropped out of school. Thirdly, as stated by Hill et al. (2005), due to the nature of the CQR method, the lack of definite directives about how the researchers reached a consensus is another limitation.

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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the study group

Pseudonyms	Biological sex	Age	Occupation	Work Schedule	School dropout affected career selection	Work Satisfaction
A	Male	27	Construction Worker	Temporary jobs	Affected	Not satisfied
B	Male	26	Curtain seller	Full time	Did not affect	Satisfied
C	Male	28	Construction Worker	Temporary jobs	Affected	Not satisfied
D	Male	25	Construction Worker	Temporary jobs	Affected	Not satisfied
E	Male	23	Subcontract Worker	Temporary jobs	Affected	Not satisfied
F	Male	30	Hotel Housekeeper	Temporary jobs	Affected	Satisfied
G	Male	24	Winch operator	Temporary jobs	Affected	Satisfied
H	Male	27	Construction Worker	Temporary jobs	Did not affect	Satisfied
J	Male	29	Sales Representative	Full time	Affected	Not satisfied
K	Male	29	Construction Worker	Temporary jobs	Affected	Not satisfied

Figure 1. Domains, categories, and subcategories

