

Preschool children from low socio-economic families' perceptions of higher education

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Suggested Citation:

Yucelyigit, S., & Er, S. (2022). Preschool children from low socio-economic families' perceptions of higher education. *Contemporary Educational Researches Journal*. 12(3), 177–183. <https://doi.org/10.18844/cerj.v12i3.6934>

Received from March 25, 2022; revised from June 06, 2022; accepted from June 22, 2022.

Selection and peer-review under the responsibility of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Deniz Ozcan, Ondokuz Mayıs University, Turkey.
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Abstract

It is often difficult for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and minorities to succeed in school. This study aimed to determine how perceptions on higher education of preschool children from low socio-economic families differ after a planned and structured visit to a university campus. The study used a phenomenological research design and 29 children (48–60 months old) were selected with a purposive sampling method from a low-income district public preschool in Ankara. Data were collected through interviews with children and their drawings. Children were asked three questions about higher education in a pre-interview and after they visited the university campus; in the post-interview they were asked the same questions. The interview results and children's drawings were analysed by content analysis. The results indicated that by participating in a set of activities at the university, children's understanding of higher education and perception of the university changed considerably.

Keywords: Higher education, low socio-economic level, preschool children, perception, university;

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1. Introduction

Students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, the government and its funding agencies, accreditors, validators, auditors and assessors are the stakeholders in higher education (Tam, 2001). Each of these stakeholders has a different view on quality in higher education. For a committed scholar, the quality of higher education is the ability to produce a steady flow of people with high intelligence and commitment to learning that will continue the process of transmission and advancement of knowledge. To the government, a high-quality system is one that produces trained scientists, engineers, architects, doctors and so on in numbers judged to be required by the society. From an industrialist view, a high-quality educational institution may turn out graduates with wide-ranging, flexible minds, readily able to acquire skills and adapt to new methods and needs (Reynolds, 1990).

The way to higher education is not equal for all students. Students especially from low socio-economic backgrounds and minorities often face challenges (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). For Clutter (2010), the strongest influence on an individual's career choice is family so the economic level of the family seems to be an important determinant among the features that affect the choice of an individual's profession. Similarly, Schoon and Parsons (2002) assume that the social class of families affects their children's professional and educational aspirations and interests. In addition, the educational level of mothers and fathers shows influential effects on the career choice of children and their interest in higher education. The more the education level of parents rises the more students become happy with the department that they are in higher education. The reason is that more educated parents are conscious of the importance of higher education, and they have the capacity of throwing light on their children to have a more dimensional perspective while they are choosing their career (Korkut-Owen, Kepir, Özdemir, Ulaş, & Yilmaz, 2012).

1.1. Related research

Interviews of children conducted to investigate children's perception about a subject help researchers to understand the way children think on the subject perceived by the child and the drawings of children expand the definition of this investigated subject. When the findings of perception studies with preschool children are examined, it is generally said that mothers have more influence on their children compared to fathers or that they have more knowledge and awareness of the subject (Boatwright, Ching, & Paar, 1992; O'Brien, Friedman, Tipton, & Linn, 2000; Otto, 2000). There are several studies conducted on perceptions of preschool children about different subjects. Ahi, Çingi, and Kıldan (2016) revealed the perception of preschool children about elementary teachers. Koçyiğit (2014) explored 6-year-old preschool children's perception of preschool. Aksoy and Baran (2010) conducted a study with 60–72-month olds to establish their perception of elementary school.

Buldu (2006) explored the perception of scientists among 5–8-year-old children. Özen Altınkaynak, Uysal Bayrak, Taşkın, and Akman (2018) aimed to determine preschoolers' perception of children about reward and punishment. Akgün and Ergül (2015) studied preschool children's perceptions of family in their drawings. Hod-Shemer, Zimerman, Hassunah-Arafat, and Wertheim (2018) investigated preschool children's perceptions of fairness to see children's points of view and suggested practical educational implications. The study of Kesicioğlu, Yıldırım Hacıbrahimoglu, and Aktaş (2019) provide an insight into the tendencies and preferences of preschool children related to play, play tools, playgrounds through interviews and children's drawings.

This research not only reveals the perception of children on a specific subject but also gives precious suggestions, to conceptualise the subject from a preschool child's perspective, correct the misunderstandings or compensate for any missing points. As the literature tells that the level of education and socio-economic level of parents have an important effect on children's education, this study aimed at

revealing higher education perceptions of preschool children coming from the low socio-economic background. Besides revealing their perceptions, the children are invited to a university campus to see what a higher education institution is. Several suggestions are shared to emphasise the importance of higher education and to raise the awareness of children and parents towards higher education.

1.2. Purpose of study

It is often difficult for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and minorities to succeed in school. This study aimed to determine how perceptions on higher education of preschool children from low socio-economic families differ after a planned and structured visit to a university campus.

2. Materials and Methods

This study used a phenomenological research design to determine preschool children's perception of higher education. Phenomenological research aims to develop a deep understanding of the phenomenon that is focused on (Creswell, 2003). In this study, the focused phenomenon is higher education, and it reveals preschool children's perceptions through interviews and drawings.

2.1. Participants

In this study, participants were selected with a purposeful sampling method. A school in a low-income district of Ankara was determined and 29 children between 48 and 60 months (mean = 51.3 months) attending the preschool classroom at this school constitute the participants of the study. 12 children were girls and 17 were boys. According to the collected data, the socio-economic level of the children's parents is low. Only 9 parents' monthly total income was over minimum wage, 13 parents earned under minimum wage and 7 did not have a regular income.

2.2. Data collection tools and procedure

Semi-structured interviews and drawings of children were used to collect data regarding the perceptions of preschool children about higher education. Semi-structured interview questions were prepared after a comprehensive literature review by two child development specialists. The interviews were held face to face in two sessions. The first one was conducted at the beginning of the study and the second one took place after children visited the university. Children were asked the same three questions in both interviews. Questions are as follows:

1. What is higher education?
2. Who attends higher education?
3. What do they do at university?

Each interview with one child at a time took approximately 10 minutes. Children were asked to draw what they have in their minds related to the question they answered. The interview was informal enough to gain additional information about the children's perceptions of higher education and university concept. The pre-interview session was completed with 29 children. Then, the children were taken to a university campus in Ankara. The visit to the campus was organised by the researchers so that children would be able to see the classes, laboratories, studios, cafeterias and amphitheatre on the campus and they also had a short visit to the dean of education faculty. They had a chance to gain awareness about different occupations which may inspire them about their future jobs. They went on with some structured play activities with a group of student-teachers at the education faculty. After the children's experiences on the campus, the researchers organised the post-interview involving the same questions asked in the pre-interview. Similar to the pre-interview, the children were asked to draw once again what they perceived from higher education. With this post-interview, the researchers aimed to reveal the possible change in children's higher education perceptions.

2.3. Data analysis

The data collected from the interviews and drawings of the children were analysed by using content analysis. The interviews were transcribed, the drawings were interpreted for each child and the results were coded to calculate the frequency of the answers for each question by the first researcher. For reliability, the second researcher coded the same data separately. The interrater agreement for the two codings was calculated as 92%. An agreement rate above 75% was considered acceptable (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2016).

3. Results

3.1. Pre-interview and drawings

The results of the pre-interview and children's drawings show that only six children claimed that they know what higher education is. On the contrary, they could not answer the other two questions. Their drawings to the first question did not demonstrate evidence for an accurate understanding of what higher education is. Since the rest of the children (23 children) declared that they did not have any idea about higher education, researchers did not continue with the other two questions with them. As expected, the drawings of 23 children did not give any clue about their perception of higher education. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of children's answers to the pre-interview question 'What is higher education?' ($n = 29$)

	Number of children	Frequency
Knows	6	21
Doesn't know	23	79

3.2. Post-interview and drawings

In the post-interview, children accomplished answering the following three questions: 'What is higher education?', 'Who attends higher education?' and 'What do they do at university?' This time all of the 29 children in the study claimed that they know what higher education is. When their answers to the second question is analysed, their results were categorised into two groups. 28 children answered this question addressing the university students and the academic staff. Only one child answered this question reflecting a different understanding about the students at a university. The results for the second question are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of children's answers to the post-interview question 'Who attends higher education?' ($n = 29$)

	Number of children	Frequency
Grown-ups/elder sisters or brother/ elders/teachers	28	97
We (children)	1	3

The answers of the children to the third question are analysed and categorised in two groups as educational and non-educational activities. 22 children established relations regarding the educational activities, such as 'study', 'do homework', 'listen to the teacher' and 'work hard', corresponding to the academic image of higher education, and 14 children seemed to establish relations to the non-academic life at a university campus, such as 'spent time together at 'amphitheatre', 'eat in the cafeteria' and 'talk with friends'. The results for the third question are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of children's answers to the post-interview question 'What do they do at university?'

	Number of children	Frequency
Educational activities	22	76 ^a
Non-educational activities	14	48 ^a

^a Some of the children's answers included both types of answers which makes $n > 29$ and sum of frequency > 100 .

4. Discussion

In this study, it is assumed that children from low socio-economic backgrounds do not have any knowledge about higher education. The research about higher education shows that students especially from low socio-economic backgrounds and minorities often face challenges (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). The challenges which could be experienced by children in their future life arise from the living conditions of their current life. There are several effects on children's future education and career choice. Two of these factors are the social class of families and the educational level of parents (Clutter, 2010; Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Korkut-Owen et al., 2012). In our study, pre-interview results support the research related to the higher education phenomenon. The children from low socio-economic backgrounds do not seem to have an accurate understanding of higher education.

This study exemplifies the change in children's perceptions depending on the opportunities offered in early childhood similar to the findings of Wright and Horta (2018). After they visited the university campus, it is observed that the views of children about university approached the real function of higher education institutions. In the pre-interview, while only six children had an idea about higher education, in the post-interview almost all of them (97%) developed an accurate understanding of higher education. Children's drawings serve as strong evidence for this change in their perceptions. In low socio-economic families with parents who did not pursue higher education, the potential of raising children's awareness about higher education remains at a very low level. At this point, the opportunity of visiting a university campus may be the reason for the change in children's perception. In this study, children not only learn about the physical environment of a university campus but also gain awareness towards higher education and its importance on their future careers. The expected answers given to the second and the third questions in the post-interview are the indicators of the change in their perception.

5. Conclusion

If children are offered opportunities that their families cannot afford, the results can have a lasting effect on the children's future. It seems that it is not easy for families with low education and income levels to improve their children's perception of higher education since they do not have their own experiences. For this reason, it is important to provide children with opportunities to raise awareness about higher education in the early period. At this point, it is suggested that universities, with the mission of serving the community, carry out activities that will raise awareness for children from all levels in low-income district schools. This study is limited by the results of the change in preschool children's perception of higher education. These studies should not be limited to children only, but also families should be reached to raise awareness about higher education. As a further study, it can be suggested to conduct studies including the families from low socio-economic and education levels.

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