

How do First-Generation Students Pave Their Ways in Higher Education? The Role of Social and Cultural Capital

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the role of social and cultural capital in first-generation students' higher education experiences. First, the relationship between these students' capital and their achievement, the role of institutional agents on their achievement and how students with low and high capital differ in their higher educational experiences and their aspirations were explored. Then, the motives of successful first-generation students were aimed to be examined. According to the results, parents' educational background was quite important in students' higher education experiences and their aspirations. While high-educated parents acted as institutional agents, first-generation students had their peers, siblings, teachers, and the institution as their agents. Inequalities due to social capital were mostly reported, and scholarships and internships contributed to those students' capital. Lastly, achieving goals, perseverance, and financial freedom were the main reasons motivating these students.

Full paper

Higher Education institutions need to response to the changing composition of student bodies and the concomitant change in student demands, which require different pedagogies, curricula, and orientations. Drawing upon Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural capital, a number of studies conducted in higher education environment have indicated that students who are first-in-family to come to university may lack the necessary capitals to enact success (O'Shea, 2016). Although there is a well-documented history of the relationship between poverty and educational underachievement, there is limited discussion of the educational achievement of working class students from deprived backgrounds, especially the first-generation students. Yet, if plausible explanations of some of the factors behind their success can be found, it may be applied to improve schooling practices for this group as well. It is no more enough to only pay attention to the inequalities in educational opportunities in higher education regarding the economic disadvantages, yet it is also pivotal to take into account the social and cultural capital of the students to provide them with equal chances for achievement, not only in transition process but also in their lived experiences in the higher education settings

and upon their graduation. Keeping in mind the relative importance of social and cultural capital of the students, it is evident that Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of economic, social and cultural capital along with the habitus, field and practice should be thoroughly understood by the teachers, researchers, and institutions in that not all the students have similar backgrounds, which possibly require differentiation in the attitudes, behaviors as well as practices in the higher education. Therefore, how field, habitus and practices in higher education institutions affect educational success of the students including their aspirations; how institutional agents in contrast to family affect students' academic success; and lastly explaining how some unexceptionally talented students, i.e. with low social and cultural capital and first to get university education in their families, succeed in schools while many others do not are aimed to be explored.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative design as it aims to explore and understand a social phenomenon in its natural setting. Since participants' experiences were thought as valuable in this research, case study was thought to be the most reliable way (Gall et al., 2003). Participants' social and cultural capital scores obtained through the Turkish adaptation of the Social and Cultural Capital Scale (Pishghadam et al., 2011) were used to select participants for the study. In addition to those scores, perceived SES, mother's education, father's education, and CGPA were used to identify the first-generation successful students. In-depth semi-structured interviews were administered with the purposively selected 10 participants among 317 students. Through the in-depth semi-structured interview questions prepared by the researcher, information regarding the family composition; past academic experiences of the students; their academic, cultural, and social interests and hobbies; academic achievement of the family members; students' attribution of their success/ failure to family members; family income, siblings, hometown and current location were elaborated. Additionally, students' perceptions related to the effects of peers, teachers, relatives, etc., on their academic achievement; their definition of success; their experiences in terms of academic, cultural, and social lives, especially during their higher education; and their future aspirations were asked during the interviews. In order to analyze the data, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was performed.

Results

The results showed that the first-generation students acquired the social and cultural capital via their interactions and observations of their teachers, and successful peers in their schooling history. The compulsory internships had both negative and positive impacts on the students' social capital, i.e. they realized the importance of networking during those internships. Although institutional agents (relatives and teachers) were important, their agency was established early in their schooling history. Parents were supportive of their children's desire to study; however, their capacity to offer direct academic support was limited by their own

educational backgrounds. In terms of their future aspirations, most students stated that they want to find a job immediately upon their graduation both to support their families financially, and to do the things they have always wished for, which were reported both as resentments and delayed activities due to lack of economic freedom and the need for conscientious study required to pave their ways via education. Lastly, being strong-willed and not giving up to achieve their targets were recommended by the participants for the students with similar life stories.

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