

# A Review of Literature on the Factors Associated with Low Socio-economic Status Students' Disengagement in Learning



**K.D.R.L.J. Perera**

Senior Lecturer, Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education  
Faculty of Education, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka

## Abstract

*This review incorporated several significant studies that observed low socioeconomic status students' disengagement in learning. Majority of the literature reviewed was published in online journals. The overarching research question of the study; What are the factors associated with students' disengagement in learning in lower SES schools? The data analysis was done using thematic analysis. At the individual student level, low SES students present cognitive issues, short concentration periods, and higher levels of distractibility. Low SES is a main factor among high risk of disengagement groups in the middle years. When it comes to the family factor, children in low SES families show lower achievement levels throughout the school years. Low SES families might be undersupplied in the essential resources, and increasing stress in those families is connected with lower achievements of the children. Low SES adolescents get lower grades and tend to drop out of education. In relation to the school factor student, teacher, classroom, and school are the causes of dissimilarities in achievement. School engagement was the main factor in deciding whether a student sustained in school or not. It has been found that family, school, and teacher are directly associated with students' engagement in learning in lower SES schools despite individual factors.*

**Keywords:** Early Adolescents, Engagement in Learning, Low Socio-Economic Status

## Introduction

This paper was written based on a theme that emerged while reviewing literature for larger research that investigated "early adolescents' motivation and engagement in learning in low socio-economic districts in Sri Lanka". This review has tried to integrate numerous significant studies that investigated low socio-economic status (SES) students' disengagement in learning.

According to Schlechty (2001) and Woolfolk and Margetts (2007), in conjunction with motivation, engagement is significant for improving the students learning outcomes. They consider motivation as a pre-requirement and an essential aspect for student engagement in learning. Scholars (e.g.,

Appleton, Christenson and Furlong, 2008; Baron and Corbin, 2012; Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004; Phan and Ngu, 2014) believe that engagement stresses students' different patterns of motivation, behaviour, and cognition. Various forms of engagement have been described in the academic literature, including school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), study engagement (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Rom and Bakker, 2002), and student engagement (Kuh, 2003). This study is considered on the students' engagement with their school and study.

Many arguments exist in the research literature with regard to the number of dimensions of student engagement. Finn (1989) and Willms (2003)

explain engagement as including two dimensions: behavioural and psychological. Fredricks et al. (2004) and Jimerson, Campos and Greif (2003) propose the dimensions as being cognitive, psychological, and behavioural, while Schaufeli et al. (2002) propose vigour, dedication, and absorption. Appleton, Christenson, Kim and Reschly (2006) describe a four-dimensional model, comprising the academic, behavioural, psychological, and cognitive dimensions.

The literature examined for this study exposed two key approaches to engagement: The North American model, primarily associated with Fredricks et al. (2004) and comprising the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional dimensions, and the European model, primarily associated with Schaufeli et al. (2002), comprising vigour, dedication, and absorption dimensions. These two models have been employed in numerous research studies (e.g., Bresó, Schaufeli and Salanova, 2011; Mo and Singh, 2008; Phan, 2014a; Salmela-Aro, Tolvanen and Nurmi, 2009; Wang, Willett and Eccles, 2011).

Numerous research studies have been completed employing both conceptualisations of the views of engagement, particularly with a focus on students' achievement (e.g., Appleton et al., 2008). There is also extensive research identifying a number of motivational and social precursors able to promote and develop students' engagement. Motivational precursors consist of self-efficacy (e.g., Phan, 2014b; Phan and Ngu, 2014a; Reeve and Lee, 2014), task value (Fan, 2011; Phan and Ngu, 2014b; Wang and Eccles, 2013), and mastery goal orientation (e.g., Phan, 2014; Wang and Holcombe, 2010). Social precursors of engagement include parents' and teachers' support (Wang and Eccles, 2012; Wang and Holcombe, 2010).

On the whole, as discussed above with an understanding of the Sri Lankan educational context, it seems that the North American model of engagement is more appropriate than the European model of engagement because of its wide coverage of engagement. Therefore, the engagement framework employed in the current study is

North American model of engagement: cognitive, behavioural, and emotional dimensions. Accordingly, in this study "engagement" refers to those three engagement types in learning.

### Methodology

The main research question of this study was: What are the factors associated with students' disengagement in learning in lower SES schools? This literature review mainly focused on books and research articles that investigated the factors associated with students' disengagement in learning in lower SES schools. Majority of the literature reviewed was published in online journals. The selected articles and books were read, and the information was tabulated in relation to the research question of the study. The data analysis was done using the thematic analysis.

### Results and Discussion

The research literature shows that a considerable number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds display indicators of disengagement; for example, high absence (Hancock, Shepherd, Lawrence and Zubrick, 2013), poorer classroom behaviours (OECD, 2012), and premature school leaving (Rumberger and Lamb, 2003). Most types of disengagement, for example, absence, troublesome behaviour, and low school relations, are connected with lack of achievement. This has important implications for the students' school experience (Hancock and Zubrick, 2015).

At the individual student level, low SES students present cognitive issues, particularly short concentration periods and higher levels of distractibility (Alloway, Gathercole, Kirkwood, and Elliot, 2009). As discussed by Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards, and Zyngier (2004), low SES is a major factor among high risk of disengagement categories in the middle school years.

When discussing the family factor, low SES family's children show lower achievement levels throughout all school years (Hancock et al., 2013). Gray and Baxter (2010), emphasised that low SES families might be deficient in the essential resources to support their children, and increasing stress in those families is associated with chil-

dren's lower achievements in learning. Similarly, low SES adolescents get lower grades and tend to drop out of education (Hauser, Simmons and Pager, 2000). In high income countries, children from low SES families have a higher chance of academic failure (Fergusson, Horwood and Boden, 2008). Further they have a greater likelihood of having low SES in later life (Matthews, Gallo and, 2010).

Kuh, Ben-Shlomo, Lynch, Hallqvist and Power (2003) found that a low SES family background is the prime indicator and risk aspect for having less education. Disadvantaged students do not achieve as well educationally as their privileged peers (Reardon, 2011; Steele, 2010). Families who have elevated poverty, high joblessness, and live in low educational level neighbourhoods have been revealed to employ fewer study-focussed activities with their children (Banerjee, 2016). Nonoyama (2005) conducted a cross-cultural study over 40 countries and found that, in those countries, family SES and background effects had a bigger influence on student achievement than SES on its own or school impacts. Further Belachew et al. (2011), in his study of 13-17-year-old adolescents in Southwest Ethiopia, found that food insecurity of the family was clearly associated with adolescents' school absenteeism and their poor academic performance.

A study was conducted by Hanson et al. (2011) using 1,006 US students and found neighbourhood financial difficulties were a significant predictor of students' lower levels of achievement in mathematics. They found some of the reasons for this situation as lack of role models, teachers, poor learning resources, and aggressive and violent behaviours for this situation. According to Basch (2011), aggression and violence lessen school connectedness and increase absenteeism. In relation to the school factor, Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer and Hutchins (2011) conducted a study using 60 schools with high-poverty and found that the basic factor in motivation and achievement of students is not the home background of students but the school and the teacher. Similarly, Finn and Rock (1997), in their investigation of

more than 1,800 poor students found that school engagement was the main factor in determining whether a student continued in school or not. Bruner (2014) studied factors affecting lower achievement of low SES students via a six-country sample and suggested that factors related to the student, teacher, classroom, and school are the causes of dissimilarities in achievement. Higher learning ambitions, empathic consideration, and optimism for the future are considered as defensive factors contributing to the educational resilience of students in SES (Gizir and Aydin, 2009). Gemisi and Lu (2014) conducted a study employing a 2,009 base year group from the Australian Youth's Longitudinal Surveys. The sample represented 15-year-old students nationally. Altogether 14,251 students and 353 schools in Australia were participated in this study. They found that socio-economic status is a strong predictor of emotional engagement, students with higher SES showed higher levels of emotional engagement with their school.

Johnson-Brown (2014) conducted a study employing all 11th-grade students in West Virginia and found that the size and rural location of the school had an effect on examination scores. Students from larger schools achieved better results, and rural schools' achievement was lower than in urban and sub-urban schools. Motivation and engagement had an effect on students' achievement (Covington, 2002; Di Domenico and Fournier, 2015; Salinas-Jimenez, Artes and Salinas-Jimenez., 2010; Walker, Green and Mansell, 2006; Williams, 2000).

When considering teachers' influence on lower SES students, Whitehead (2006) found that the lowest SES quartile students are regularly absent from school due to their fear of being embarrassed in the classroom and also due to their teachers' low expectations of their achievement. Positive teacher expectations, help, and motivation have beneficial developmental impacts on students despite their vulnerable low SES situation (Sorhagen, 2013). Archambault, Janosz and Chouinard (2012) claim that teachers' understanding of student views, cheering relations,

and a better classroom active lead to enhanced achievement by lower SES students. According to Hoglebe and Tate (2010), high poverty schools teacher excellence remains an important policy aim for reformation and development. Support provided by the teacher for lower SES students might even assist to modify the negative relationship between poverty and educational achievement (Little-Harrison, 2012; Liu and Wang, 2008). An enthusiastic teacher who has an advanced level of self-efficacy can disregard lower SES, poverty, or adversities and assist in creating a friendly learning situation (Freitas, 2013).

In summary, adolescents from underprivileged environments often face many challenges that block their learning. Their position worsens if they do not have helpful surroundings in school and in their society (Banerjee, 2016).

### Conclusion

In this literature review it has been found that at the individual student level, low SES students present cognitive issues, particularly short concentration periods and higher levels of distractibility. When discussing the family factor, low SES family's children show lower achievement levels throughout all school years. A low SES family background is the prime indicator and risk aspect for having less education. Families who have elevated poverty, high joblessness, and live in low educational level neighbourhoods have been revealed to employ fewer study-focussed activities with their children. It was found some of the reasons for this situation as lack of role models, teachers, poor learning resources, and aggressive and violent behaviours. It was further revealed that the basic factor in motivation and achievement of students is not the home background of students but the school and the teacher. Moreover, it was found that factors related to the student, teacher, classroom, and school are the causes of dissimilarities in achievement. Higher learning ambitions, empathic consideration, and optimism for the future are considered as defensive factors contributing to the educational resilience of students in SES. As a whole, it has been found that family (including neighbourhood),

school, and teacher are directly associated with students' engagement in learning in lower SES schools despite individual factors (e.g., self-concept). Therefore, these factors must be improved to increase lower SES students' engagement (and motivation) in learning to enhance their participation in learning. There might be more factors such as students with special educational needs, associated with low SES students' disengagement in learning and those factors to be revealed.

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